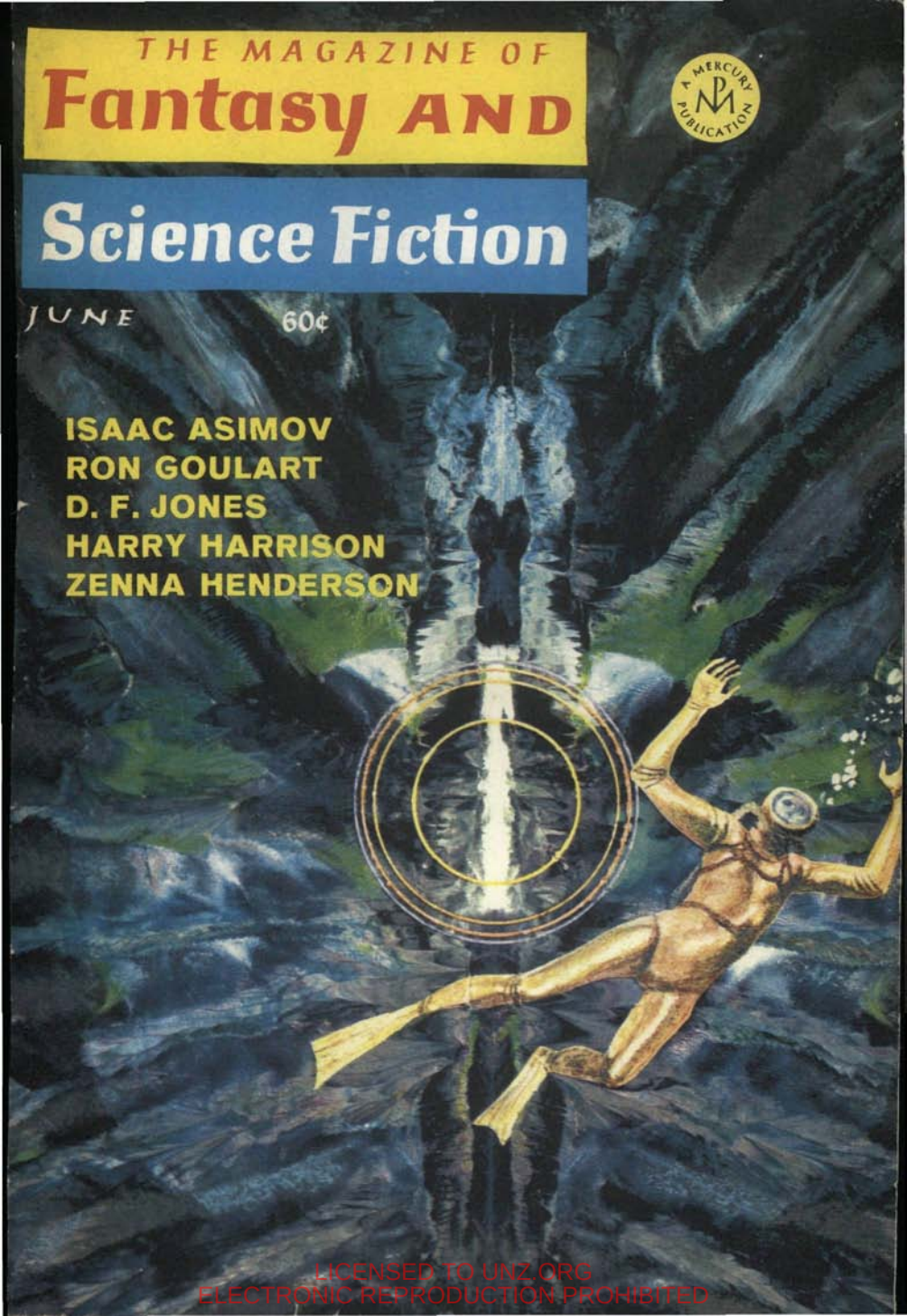

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Fantasy and Science Fiction

JUNE • 21ST YEAR OF PUBLICATION

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D. F. Jones is the author of three novels: DON'T PICK THE FLOWERS *(forthcoming from Walker),* IMPLOSION, *and* COLOSSUS; *a movie based on the latter will be released this year by Universal. Mr. Jones lives in Cornwall, England. He was a commander in the British Navy throughout World War II, which accounts for the authentic background of this suspenseful nautical sf tale.*

THE TOCSIN

by D. F. Jones

WHEN DID IT START? A VERY good question—with no handy answer. What happened? Again no handy answer. Not yet . . .

A fact or two. The night of July 22/23, 1966, was, in Cornwall, England, warm and damp, with a thin white mist drowning the valleys, shrouding all but the higher hills. Cornwall is a strange, very old place, abounding in myths and legends which, in a bright-lit city, may seem childish; but on such a night as this one it could strike the lonely traveler in a very different way. Here, two thousand years ago, the Greeks and Phoenicians traded for the native tin, and the tin sellers were not the first inhabitants, not by a long way. On many a bleak hill there are hut circles, tumuli-settlements not used these five, ten thousand years. Even King Arthur with his kingdom of Lyonesse, lost somewhere in the depths of the unforgiving sea, is relatively new . . .

So it was a warm night, which was just as well. Most windows were open and thus a lot of broken glass was avoided, for at 2:50 a.m. the still night was shattered by a long, crashing rumble. A lot of middle-aged Britishers are connoisseurs of loud bangs: this one, in more ways than one, shook them.

The local press headlined it as WHAT WENT BUMP IN THE NIGHT? It was going to be quite a story but was killed stone dead

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the next day by a major boating disaster off the Cornish coast. So the big bang got little coverage. Neither did the report of a bright white object in the local sky. The first was written off as a minor earth tremor; the latter, another of those American balloon satellites. These are facts. If curious, investigate the files of the *West Briton & Royal Cornish Gazette,* Truro, England.

Geoff Lewis was a keen and very practiced skin-diver, and for those who like that sort of thing, the Cornish seas are a very good place indeed. The county's granite-bound shores have spelt doom for countless ships, from prehistoric log-rafts to the *Torrey Canyon.* Wars, storms and bad visibility have claimed the unlucky, the unwary and the weak; and while Cornishmen no longer deserve their old, black reputation as wreckers, the other hazards remain.

Not that Geoff Lewis was looking for wrecks when he backflipped into the calm, sunlit sea. Something of a gadgeteer, he had a new depth gauge and intended testing its accuracy in a known depth of water. He told his boatman he would be down for half an hour.

The boatman, a teak-faced ex-Navy CPO, as soon as Lewis had disappeared in a flurry of foam, checked his position by taking bearings with a hand compass on two points on the distant shore, then settled down to smoke a particularly vicious pipe which his wife would not allow in the house.

Lewis was not gone half an hour; it was nearer ten minutes. He surfaced, swam to the boat, and was hauled aboard.

"Something wrong, Mr. Lewis?"

Lewis sat, face mask pushed back on his head, mouthpiece dangling on his chest. He did not answer at once, staring pensively at nothing. He roused himself.

"Wrong? No, not really. Just a slight shock, that's all. Thought I knew this area pretty well. Shows how wrong—" He frowned slightly. "We haven't drifted much, have we, Bob?"

It was Bob's turn to frown.

"No, Mr. Lewis," he said firmly, "I checked our bearings on Blackstone and on Polzean Point as soon as you dived, and again a couple of minutes back. The tide's not making yet. Pretty near slack water, and no wind. We've hardly moved a foot."

"Well, I don't know." Lewis was automatically checking his equipment. "I damn near dived on top of a wreck. Looks like a warship."

Bob looked round sharply. "A warship, Mr. Lewis? How old?" A fair question in these waters.

Lewis shrugged. "I'm no expert, Bob, but I'd say pretty modern. In some ways too damned

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modern." He stood up, balancing easily against the slight roll of the boat. "I'm going down again. Send down the shopping bag, will you? I expect to be down half an hour."

Slowly, methodically, Bob lowered the "shopping-bag"—a weighted nylon net—as soon as Lewis had disappeared. He watched the line until he got the single tug which indicated Lewis had it, and then with even more care, checked their position once more.

It was twenty-five minutes later when Lewis broke surface, a few yards from the boat. Once aboard he slumped down in the stern, his face white and pinched. Without comment, Bob poured him a cup of hot coffee, eyeing the diver with considerable interest; cold the water might be, but not that cold . . .

Lewis gulped at his drink, gratefully warming his hands on the mug. He stared, unseeing, at the contents, shivered slightly.

"Haul in the net, will you?"

The net came clear of the sea, dripping mud, discoloring the clear, clean water. Carefully the boatman dunked the net until the worst of the mud had gone, then laid it on the sun-dried bottom boards of the boat. He raised a bushy eyebrow at Lewis, who nodded.

The old sailor's expression did not change, but his eyes were suddenly still as he opened and spread the net, revealing the contents.

The largest item was a book, its pages pulpy, riddled with sea-lice, but the leather bound covers were still stiff, and the ex-Navy man knew why. They were made of lead. He brushed the cover very gently with the back of his hand, his lips moved as he picked out the deeply embossed words of the title.

Secret. Fleet Signal Book. S.P. 02169. Copy No. 719.

He turned almost reluctantly to the other object in the net.

It was a flat, circular metal object, probably made of bronze, since it was free of corrosion. On one side there was a design in relief. In the center, surrounded by a stylized rope, was the image of a devil, complete with gaily curled tail and the traditional pitchfork. Above the figure, set in a rectangular tablet, was the word DEMON in capital letters. Surmounting that, an Admiralty crown.

"Well—bugger me!" said Bob in soft amazement. "The old *Demon!*"

Lewis was stripping off his gear. He stopped. "You knew her?"

Bob smiled sadly, his mind a long way back.

"Yes. I knew her. In the same flotilla as me, she was. That was back in '42. Heard she copped it down this way in '44, around invasion time."

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Lewis was interested. "What did she look like, Bob?"

"She was a destroyer, fourteen hundred tons. Two funnels, four four-inch guns, eight torpedo tubes—"

"Four guns, you say?"

"Main armament, that is. There was a three-inch AA gun amidships as well."

Lewis nodded. "That fits. I counted five guns. Of course, the funnels were practically gone, just stumps left—" He broke off and shivered again, and caught the boatman's expression. He explained, "It was all damned odd, Bob. You know this isn't exactly my first wreck, but this one seems different."

"How?"

"For a start, she's on an even keel. At one moment the sun came out, and I could see practically the whole length of the ship. The bridge structure concealed the missing funnels, and it looked for all the world as if she was steaming . . ." He tried to laugh. "Of course, when I took a closer look, I saw the damn great hole in the bottom, below the after funnel. Whatever got her made a hell of a mess—"

"Probably a mine," put in Bob. "A U-boat this close in is very unlikely. One of those bleeding magnetics, I expect." He stared again at the badge in his hand, but he was thinking still of mines. "Bastard things!" He spoke with unusual emphasis. He tried to look on the brighter side. "Still, apart from the poor sods in the engine and boiler rooms, the rest of the lads would stand a good chance of getting away."

His words had a surprising effect on Lewis. He spoke almost eagerly, "You really think so?"

Now the boatman looked surprised. "Well, yes. Most of the crew lived up forward in that class, and best part of a third would have been on watch—why?"

"That was the odd bit. I took a quick look around, including the living space—"

"The main messdeck," amended Bob.

"Yes. Well, there were no signs of—of humans. Just tables and stools, all neat and tidy. No fish, no weeds—nothing."

Bob was silent, trying to visualize the scene. He put down the badge. "Nothing else?"

"As far as my torch allowed, no. Oh, yes, there were a few dishes lying on the deck, that's all."

"Expect most of the mess was buried in silt and stuff."

Lewis looked very strangely at the old Navy man. "That's the oddest part of all. I'm not saying the deck was as clean as a new pin, but damn near. Honestly, Bob, if you told me she was sunk last week, I'd believe you. No seaweed or barnacles anywhere—I

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wouldn't have been such a bloody fool as to go below if there was a chance of tearing my suit." He shook his head. "I don't get it, I really don't."

Neither did Bob. He changed the subject. "That book, Mr. Lewis—what are you going to do with it?"

"Hadn't thought. Keep it, I suppose."

"It's none of my business, but I reckon you should tell the Navy. This badge," he pointed to the bronze plaque, "is most likely off a boat, but that there book is—was—secret. I think that even now they'd like to know about it, just to keep the record straight."

"Yes," replied Lewis. "I have to go over to Plymouth this week, I'll see someone then—and maybe find out a bit more about *Demon*. Come on, Bob. Let's go home."

Three days later Lewis was escorted down a long, gray-painted underground corridor, past doors marked with those incomprehensible jumbles of letters and figures so beloved by government departments. His escort stopped before one which had two labels: the first said, "S.O.(I)"; the other, "Knock and wait."

S.O.(I) turned out to be a Commander Maitland, youthful in face and figure, but with incongruously gray hair. The letters, Lewis learned, meant Staff Officer, Intelligence. At another desk in the small, bright-lit room sat a second, younger officer in a slightly different uniform. He smiled briefly at Lewis and got on with his paperwork. Lewis, no expert on Service matters, was not aware that this was Lieutenant Commander Brett Hargreaves, USN, on exchange duty with the Royal Navy.

Lewis told his story. The S.O.(I) listened quietly, watchfully. The battered, twisted signal book and the badge lay on the desk. Politely, the naval officer made no attempt to look at them while Lewis was speaking. When the diver had finished, Maitland smiled smoothly.

"Thank you very much, Mr. Lewis, for your public-spirited action." He pulled a document file across his desk. "Of course, we have no objection to your retaining the badge," almost ceremonially he passed it back to Lewis, "but I'm not so sure about this." He tapped the book. "Frankly, I'm not sure what the drill is." That seemed to worry him. "It's not every day we get documents returned this way." He opened the file.

"Since your phone call, I've dug out the *Demon* papers—it struck me you might like to know a little more."

Lewis made a suitable noise and nodded.

"Just to be sure, I'll check that this is the *Demon's* copy." Mait-

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land leafed through the yellowing papers. "Here it is—the list of classified documents lost with the ship." His searching finger stopped. "Yes, that's *Demon* all right. F.S.B., Copy No. 719. Where exactly did you find it?"

"It was in a locker on the bridge."

"Ah!" the commander nodded. "She must have gone down very quickly. Given time, the drill laid down it should be shoved in a weighted bag and dumped over the side—or failing that, this particular book could be tossed over the side, the lead covers would do the rest." He turned back to the first page of the file. "I see she struck a mine; that could have folded her up very quickly."

Lewis had not told all his story, nor mentioned his feeling of unease. "Well," he said, uncertainly, "I'm not so sure she went all that fast. The ship is not badly broken up, and after all, most of the crew must have got away."

"Oh? Why d'you say that?" Maitland's face was expressionless.

Lewis told about the empty messdeck, finishing with the candid statement, "It was damned eerie down there!"

"I'd have thought any wreck was eerie, Mr. Lewis."

"No, not when you get used to them. But *Demon's* different." He explained about the lack of silt and weed and repeated what he had said to the boatman. "She looks as if she's only been on the bottom for a week!"

S.O.(I) shook his head and glanced at the file. "It's a lot longer. Twelfth of July, 1944, by mine, in position 180 degrees, ten miles from the Lizard Light—"

Lewis frowned in puzzlement. "What did you say the position was?"

Maitland's face was suddenly very stiff. "180 degrees, ten miles from the Lizard."

"The Lizard!" Lewis muttered, half to himself, then, "I'm sorry, Commander, but that position is way out!" He dug into his pocketbook and produced a slip of paper. "There—that's the position. It must be forty, fifty miles from the one you have there."

"Really?"

Lewis began to feel annoyed. It was obvious the naval officer had no faith in the accuracy of his position.

S.O.(I) saw he had ruffled his visitor. "I'm sure there is a simple explanation, Mr. Lewis. May I keep this position? Thank you." It was clear he wanted to end the meeting. "I'll certainly see that *Demon's* position is verified. Again, thank you very much." He rose, held out his hand. The interview was over.

For some minutes after the frosty departure of Lewis, Maitland sat rereading the papers before him, humming tunelessly.

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Then he got up, crossed to the wall chart, and plotted Lewis' version of *Demon*'s position. He stopped humming and spoke without looking round.

"You think I handled that badly, don't you, Brett?"

"It's not for me to say, Commander."

"Oh, come off it! Be honest!"

"OK, yes. That guy's gone off with a pretty poor opinion of the military mind. Right or wrong, he is very sure of that position and reckons you just won't admit the Navy has made a mistake."

The British officer was in no way put out. He measured off a distance on the chart before returning to his seat.

"Yes," he said. "That's exactly what I wanted."

"For crying out loud! Why?"

"One very good reason," replied Maitland gravely. "I'm certain that his position is correct."

Brett Hargreaves thought about that for a while, then said, "OK, I'll buy it."

"The codeword TOCSIN means nothing to you?"

All armed forces are bedeviled with codewords, usually prefixed by a descriptive noun—Operation Overlord, Exercise Silver Tower. As an intelligence officer, Brett Hargreaves carried more than his fair share of them in his brain. Finally he shook his head. "No. No trace. What is it, exercise, project or operation?"

"No. This one has no prefix."

"Oh! Like that is it?" Unprefixed codewords are not all that common, and as both men well knew, usually spelt trouble.

Maitland read his thoughts and smiled in a wintry sort of way. "Yes, Brett, it is like that. Not that there has, as yet, been much to go on—I'll see the file is marked to you—but this is definitely a TOCSIN item."

"And?" The American got out his cigarette case but did not bother to offer one to the RN officer. They were on good enough terms to be really rude to each other, and the Britisher had been very explicit about American cigarettes.

"And this." Maitland sat back, looked up at the soundproof ceiling, and marshaled his thoughts. "TOCSIN. Current grading, Secret, but if I'm any judge, likely to be elevated to Top Secret any minute now. Item. A frigate, after running repairs to its sonar, nipped off to the nearest submarine wreck—a U-boat—to check the set. After six hours of search they gave up looking. Back in Portland the shore staff checked the equipment. Nothing wrong with it."

"So they shot the navigator?"

"No. Three days later, two minehunters with very sophisticated sea-bed search sonar had a look. Those sets can locate an old oil drum, let alone an eight hun-

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dred ton U-boat. For two days they searched; nothing."

Hargreaves spoke without thinking. "Maybe the tidal stream shifted it?"

"They did think of that," replied Maitland, with commendable mildness.

"Sorry."

"And don't think no one had bothered about the wreck for years, either. It was used regularly for elementary training of sonar operators. Certainly it was in position a fortnight before the frigate looked."

"Say—" Hargreaves stopped, thinking. "Skip it—for now."

"That was not the end." Maitland frowned and picked a minute bit of fluff off his uniform. "The hunters began to doubt *their* gear. They moved over to the wreck of a ten thousand ton tanker, bombed and sunk in '42. You'll never guess."

Hargreaves swallowed some smoke in surprise, and coughed. "You mean that too—"

The S.O.(I) nodded. "That was where the TOCSIN file started. To mislay a sub is bad enough, a tanker as well was too much. The Hydrographer was dragged in and a full survey of the area made." Maitland paused. "There used to be thirty-nine easily identifiable wrecks—including *Demon*—within a twenty-mile radius of the Lizard. They've all gone."

"But why?—the Russians—"

"No, not why, Brett—how? I know you Yanks see a Russian under every damned bed, but really! A salvage operation like this on our doorstep is hardly likely to escape our notice! And if the ships weren't moved by orthodox means, then how?" He closed the file. "Anyway, it's all so incredibly pointless; if there was a new type of nuclear sub stuck down there, it's just possible the Russkies might have a go—but thirty-nine ships, none of them later than World War II!"

"From what you haven't said, I get the impression *Demon* is the first to be rediscovered."

"She is. Which, incidentally, disposes of some theories. If someone was mad enough to raise all those wrecks, why just dump them down again somewhere else?"

Hargreaves lit another cigarette. "Sir, I don't like to say this —"

Maitland gave him a sardonic grin. "My dear fellow, let me spare you the embarrassment of asking. No, as far as I know, Washington has not been told yet."

The US officer grinned back. "Well, that was only half what I was going to say. Don't you think —"

Maitland was locking up his papers. "I think," he said firmly, "it's time for lunch. TOCSIN may be madly intriguing, but it can wait that long."

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They were leaving the office when Brett remembered something.

"Just one thing; that guy Lewis said *Demon* was unnaturally clean. No weeds, barnacles—or bodies. I notice you didn't comment."

"Ten out of ten! That aspect is why I think TOCSIN is going to Top Secret." Maitland's smooth, languid manner had gone; his blue eyes were hard and cold. "One hundred and seventy-eight men died with *Demon;* she was mined a little after midday. That messdeck would have been crowded with sailors eating their dinner, and if they all had time to get clear—and some must have been injured in the explosion—how was it that there wasn't time to ditch that code book?" He adjusted his cap. "One more thing for you to mull over; only fifty-nine bodies were ever recovered."

"How did it go, Mr. Lewis?"

Lewis scowled. The memory of his Plymouth visit still rankled. "I saw some well-dressed staff bloke, nice as pie he was—until I gave him the wreck's position. Didn't say so, but it was bloody obvious he thought I was talking through the back of my neck! Just wouldn't accept the idea that the Navy could be wrong!" He shook his head sadly. "No, Bob, I'm afraid the Navy's not what it was in your day."

Bob, who had done his fair share of officer-cursing in his time, was not prepared to renew the habit with a civilian. He remained silent, feeling a little let-down.

"As far as I'm concerned," went on Lewis bitterly, "if I found half the damned Fleet down there, I wouldn't tell 'em!"

Had Lewis known the truth, he would have been staggered. His meeting had been at 11:30 a.m. Less than twelve hours later, under cover of darkness, a frigate was on top of *Demon,* probing with her sonar, and dropping a team of expert skin-divers with equipment that would have turned Lewis green with envy.

The pubs, clubs, bars and girls in Portland and Weymouth had a very quiet ten days. Practically every ship in the antisubmarine training base was at sea. With the lead the discovery of *Demon* had given, several other shifted wrecks were relocated and identified. The TOCSIN file thickened daily. As Maitland had forecast, the subject was now Top Secret and had the highest priority.

Brett Hargreaves, saddled with a lot of extra work which the S.O.(I), now full-time on TOCSIN, unloaded on him, was both busy and unusually silent. He made several phone calls to the USN in London, spent a lot of time in the intelligence library,

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and paid a visit to Grosvenor Square. It was the morning after that visit that he broke silence.

"Sir, I'd like to talk with you."

That "sir" told Maitland that the US officer was not looking for an idle chat.

"Will it keep? I've got this staff meeting on TOCSIN in half an hour."

"I know, but what I have may be TOCSIN material."

Maitland's eyebrows went up perceptibly, the ultimate in facial expression as far as he was concerned. "Something I don't know?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very well." Maitland glanced at his watch. "Five minutes, Brett. Shoot!"

Ten minutes later it looked as if his eyebrows were permanently fixed in the elevated position. Seeking some other outlet for his surprise, he prodded viciously at his blotting pad with a pencil, thinking. At last he spoke.

"You're sure of your facts, Brett?"

"Quite sure. The theory is, well, just my theory."

"And what a lulu that is!" He glanced at his watch.

"What d'you think of the theory, sir?" Brett said anxiously.

Maitland was busy locking up his papers, a never-ending chore in the intelligence world. "Frankly, it's so way-out, no one's going to jump at it, but I think it deserves serious consideration. It does one thing nothing else does; it explains the inexplicable. Lock up, Brett, You come to the meeting and try it for size on the admiral!"

"Don't you think we should chew it over first?"

"No, my boy! If you're wrong, we have red faces—but if you're only partly right, every bloody minute may count!"

The admiral, a man of notably few words, glanced down the long, green baize-covered table at his attentive staff, and got down to business.

"Gentlemen. TOCSIN. Maitland, you first."

Maitland, standing at the end of the table, unveiled his blackboard, disclosing a chart. "The black symbols show the old positions of the thirty-nine wrecks. The red symbols are wrecks in new positions. Where a red line connects a black to a red, it is the same wreck. *Demon,* for example, was here," his pointer touched a black mark, then moved along the red line, "and is now here. You will see ten wrecks have been identified, and there are four more not yet named. One fact, looking at those red lines, is obvious."

It was. The lines were of varying lengths, but all pointed towards an unmarked center, and all the wrecks had moved away from that point.

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The admiral spoke. "Those lines radiate from a center, if continued inwards, where would they intersect?"

"They don't intersect exactly, sir," said Maitland. "But they all cross in an area a half mile in diameter which is roughly a mile north of the Lizard Light."

"Fantastic!" said the admiral. Another officer caught his eye. "Yes, S.O.(O)?"

The staff officer, operations, stared at the chart as he spoke. "Given that center, if we drew a line through it and the old position of a wreck not yet rediscovered, it looks as if all we have to do to find it is to sweep outwards along that line."

Maitland spoke with a touch of asperity. "We had already reached that conclusion, sir. The four wrecks not yet identified are probably these." His pointer tapped audibly in the silent room.

"Yes. Try it, S.O.(O). Anything else, Maitland?"

"Yes, sir. All wrecks examined are remarkably free from weed, barnacles—and no human remains have been found."

"Fantastic," said the admiral again. "Any theories?"

Maitland got in first. "As you say, sir, it *is* fantastic, and it may be that the answer is fantastic."

The admiral glared at him. In the admiral's book, this was dangerously near "waffle". Maitland hurried on.

"I have brought Lieutenant Commander Hargreaves to this meeting for a very special reason. Less than half an hour ago, he propounded to me a theory which *is* fantastic, backed up by a little collateral. I think it deserves our very serious consideration, and I submit, sir, that no one laughs it out of court unless he has good grounds to do so." These were fighting words, and Brett warmed to the dapper RN commander. The admiral looked at his intelligence officer intently, he appreciated as well as Brett that Maitland was sticking his neck out. He looked down the table at the uneasy Brett.

"Point taken, Maitland. Right, Hargreaves, let's have it!"

"Sir," said the US officer, looking unnecessarily at his notes, "I was present when Commander Maitland interviewed this man about *Demon*. Somehow, it rang a bell with me, but I couldn't think why. A day later it clicked. Sir, before I was assigned to your command, I reported into ComNavEu on arrival from the States. There I met an old shipmate. To cut it short, sir, we dined together and had a few drinks, talking over old times—you know—" Hargreaves looked appealingly at the admiral. He knew he might appear to be "waffling."

The admiral understood. "I know. Take your time."

Encouraged, Hargreaves went

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on more easily. "Well, we talked a hell of a lot—and drank a fair amount—and I didn't remember all that was said with first-class clarity, but when I heard that *Demon* interview, well! It took some time to locate this shipmate again—he was in Brussels for a conference—but yesterday I saw him in London and went over his story again in slow time. Naturally I did not mention TOCSIN to him but said I wanted to be stone-cold sure of the facts. He knows I'm in intelligence and left with the impression I had dreamed up a Russian angle on his story." Brett Hargreaves paused. "I'm sorry about all this, sir, but I don't want you to think this is a lot of moonshine."

"All right, my boy—go on."

"Three months ago, Ed—Lieutenant Commander Shultz—was commanding a DDE in the Caribbean. While on passage along the north coast of Puerto Rico, heading for San Juan, they intercepted a call for help, and being close, Shultz naturally answered it—especially as it looked like a case of mutiny in a US vessel. They boarded the ship—a run-down yacht—and found quite a situation. The yacht was on hire to a salvage syndicate working a galleon, lost en route to Spain with gold. The previous season they had located it, and got out enough treasure—mainly silver—to bring them back again once the hurricane season was past. There was only one snag; the wreck wasn't there any more."

Suddenly, the room was very silent.

Hargreaves went on. "At first the three partners thought they were mistaken, then they reckoned bad weather had shifted it, but that seemed unlikely for it had been down there for three hundred years, and the hurricane season had not been all that bad. They'd checked and rechecked, and there wasn't a vestige of doubt in their minds that they had the right position, but no wreck. Tension had grown; one of the partners, drunk, accused the others of double-crossing him, shifting the galleon in the off season to cut him out. He had a gun, shot one partner, and reckoning the hired captain was in it too, was after him as well. The skipper locked himself in the bridge and radioed for help. Shultz sent the yacht into San Juan with an armed guard on the killer, but as he would have to report pretty full on the matter, he carried out a sonar check of the area. Negative results. In port, he checked with the local authorities, and was left in no doubt. There had been a wreck there, and now there wasn't, and there was no worthwhile explanation. Those, sir, are the facts," concluded Hargreaves. "The theory is, I'm afraid, somewhat way-out."

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"Go on."

"Well, there is one similarity which is obvious—and another which is not so obvious, but my theory hangs on it. I checked with Shultz roughly where that galleon was. It was close inshore, three or four miles northeast of Arecibo."

The chief of staff, a captain, jumped visibly. "Good God!"

"Yes, sir," replied Hargreaves with feeling, "that was my reaction!"

"Explain!" said the admiral, shortly.

"Sir, in the Arecibo valley is one of the world's largest radio telescopes." Hargreaves swung round towards the chart. "I haven't had time to check exactly, but I guess that center of intersection can't be all that far from the radio telescope at Goonhilly!"

Maitland spoke. "The center is about a mile south of the station."

"Of course, this could be coincidental, but I find that hard to believe."

"What, exactly, do you believe?"

This was the crunch. Hargreaves swallowed. "We've talked and laughed at the idea for years; now I think it's really happened. I think we have visitors. Visitors from space."

There was no real surprise around the table. Someone gave a half-strangled snort of disbelief, but the rest had been on to the idea since the mention of the Arecibo telescope. It was just that Hargreaves had the floor, and he said it.

"How does this wreck business fit in your theory?" said the chief of staff, choosing his words carefully.

"Primarily, I don't think whoever it is, is interested in them. I think they have only been moved out of the way."

"Out of the way of what?"

"I think it is their equivalent of a jungle clearing for a helicopter or VTOL landing pad. It may be that the metal worries them."

"But the galleon would be of timber," objected the admiral.

"Yes, sir, but we don't know how much metal would worry them—if that idea is right. After all, the ship must have had cannons, shot, that sort of thing."

"I'm no technician," admitted the admiral, "but I assume you think the radio telescopes have been used as homing beacons? I thought they were receivers, not transmitters."

The communications officer intervened. "Even receivers can radiate, sir, and I rather think these telescopes have been used to transmit."

"So, technically, you would not rule out the idea of them being used as beacons?"

"No, sir."

The admiral was silent for a time, apparently interested in the

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state of his finger nails. Suddenly he spoke. "Hargreaves, it appears that TOCSIN started about a month ago. Your Arecibo report is three months old. Nothing further has happened there."

"No, sir, I am not sure I'd put it that way. We know the U-boat was in its old position a month ago, but there's no proof as yet that the rest weren't moved weeks or months before. The intruders could have been here for quite a time."

"My God!" It was the chief of staff again. "I've just remembered. Must have been eighteen months or more back. I was over at the naval air station at Culdrose. There was a hell of a bang one night, and I never did see a satisfactory answer. I wonder . . ."

"Now, James," said the admiral severely, "don't let's add to the problems! Any other points, Hargreaves?"

"One, sir. The wreck-movement business. I'm painfully aware it sounds like science fiction, but I suspect they were moved by some sort of force field."

"Why?"

"Well, I think this absence of barnacles and weed is significant. I think the wrecks were energized in some way. Either the weed and stuff was burnt off or shocked off."

The chief of staff nodded excitedly. "Yes! That bang I mentioned could have been an ammunition ship going up under its influence—"

The admiral shut him up with a single look. "Hargreaves, I note you did not include human remains in that particular theory."

"No, sir. I think that, whoever it was, they vectored in on Goonhilly and Arecibo because both are close to water. Maybe they need the overlying pressure of water. Perhaps it approximates more to their normal conditions than to our atmosphere. All the same, they must be a very advanced crowd and would wish to study our physical make-up, and skeletons would be a useful start."

"What you say presupposes we have been under surveillance before this event."

An anonymous voice put in "flying saucers?"

"I think it is a reasonable assumption, sir." Hargreaves hesitated. "I'd like to know how many missing persons have been listed in these areas in the past few months."

There was a dead silence while the idea sank in.

"Live specimens, eh? Swimmers, for instance. There are certainly plenty of fatalities every year along this coast," said the chief of staff.

"Also ashore, sir. It would point to their ability to operate in what, if I'm right, is a very alien situation."

The staff officer, operations,

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snorted. "Really, sir! At the risk of being thought square, I must say I think all this is bunk! Just supposing something did land a month, six months ago. Why haven't we detected them before this? Why have they not made some overt move? Take the Arecibo incident; by Hargreaves' theory, they've been in occupation for at least three months and not a damned thing has happened or been seen!"

Hargreaves got in quickly. "Commander, I think you are just seeing this situation anthropomorphically—"

"I'm *what?*" The S.O.O. glared at the American.

"Anthropomorphically — seeing a nonhuman situation in human terms. You think three months is a long time in this connection. If a mayfly could think, our life span would seem to it, literally, an eternity. How can we know what time scale these intruders work in?"

"All right," said S.O.O., changing his ground. "Take another point. If they have had their eye on us, and know all about water, why bother with all this rigmarole of vectoring in on radio telescopes? If they can navigate umpteen light-years to this planet, the last few miles is not going to be all that difficult."

"No, sir, it is not. But try to see it from their angle. If we detected unnatural radiations from a planet, we would try to pinpoint the radiation source. There might be all sorts of creatures on the planet—just as there are here —but if you found out which sort of creature was operating the radiation source, you'd be on to the one with intelligence."

The admiral had allowed this exchange largely because he was, for a time, busy with his own thoughts. Now he intervened.

"All right, gentlemen. This is getting very airy-fairy. Maitland and Hargreaves, get the facts and the outline of the theory on paper. Don't try to tart it up." He looked at his chief of staff. "James, lay on a sonar sector-search, working outwards from the Lizard for a radius of twenty miles. Maximum effort, reports every twelve hours to me. Object of search, anything untoward. Let the S.O.O. have a frigate to check that line theory." He transferred his attention to his communications officer. "Flags, I want a brief report, not too technical, on radio telescopes with special reference to the detectable emissions." Then it was his secretary's turn. "Lay on a chopper for three p.m. and request an urgent meeting with the First Sea Lord."

The secretary nodded and left. He knew better than to hang about when the old man was in this mood.

The admiral looked down the table. "Maitland—Flags! See that

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I have your reports before I take off. Hargreaves, you'll be coming with me." He gave his staff one final stare, a very faint smile showed around the corners of his mouth. "No talk of this with anyone except yourselves. If Hargreaves is only partly right, this is clearly a matter for the highest levels. If wrong,"—he stood up; there was a general scraping of chairs—"I'd rather go on pension in silence. The laughter would be deafening."

The London meeting was short but very productive. No one went overboard for the theory, but no one was disposed to disregard it. The USN was informed, and Hargreaves found himself in the curious position of representing the British view to his own countrymen in Grosvenor Square.

But all concerned were hampered by the need for secrecy. The heads of both governments were informed, and they hesitantly approved the action taken and proposed. As politicians they were particularly sensitive to the possibility of ridicule, and they laid down the most stringent orders for security. TOCSIN was dynamite whichever way the cookie crumbled, and those in the know were the most exclusive club in the world, with less than thirty members. And that, as the admiral remarked caustically, was twenty-nine too many.

So TOCSIN remained, apart from the heads of state, the private property of the Royal and the United States Navies. Since the largest group of TOCSIN personnel in the UK were in Plymouth and it was the nearest command point to the Lizard area, the British TOCSIN cell was established there. Brett Hargreaves was whistled back to form the US cell at ComLant's HQ at Norfolk, Va. Both cells were linked by a very private line, and both had direct access to the top man in their respective services. The setup was remarkably secure, but it had severe disadvantages . . .

Hargreaves lived and breathed TOCSIN and was the moving spirit in the organization. He had started the ball rolling, and the more he thought, the more he was sure he was right, and on the personal level he knew his career now hung on his being right. This was a powerful incentive, and most of the bright ideas came from him. While others probed and studied the Lizard and Puerto Rico areas, Hargreaves compiled a list of all organizations which might make deliberate or accidental transmissions into space and which were located near the sea. Thus he stumbled across the prime target of all, a discovery that had him sweating with excitement—and alarm.

Brett Hargreaves hailed from Maine, he was not interested in

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space travel, and he had never been to Texas. In the course of checking his list of stations, it came as a surprise to him to find that Houston, Texas, was very close to the sea, and it was a considerable shock to find that NASA's Mission Control Center was less than half a mile from Clear Lake, which connected with Galveston Bay . . .

When Hargreaves stared at that map, he was sure of one thing: this *must* be the prime target. From here went the command signals to the interplanetary probes. If the intruders could detect the emissions of radio telescopes, they could hardly fail to note the significance of control signals to vehicles halfway to Mars! For sure, NASA must be the center of their interest . . .

Thus it was that the Commandant, 8th Naval District, New Orleans, Louisiana, received orders to check the wreck situation in Galveston Bay and adjacent waters. Propelled by this high-powered but mysterious Pentagon directive, the search was made with commendable speed. The Commandant reported, with understandable bewilderment, that the situation was normal. Hargreaves, deeply committed to proving the existence of intruders and less and less concerned with the long-term implications of the threat they might pose, was the only TOCSIN member who did not sigh with relief. He was bitterly disappointed . . .

He had also been disappointed with the negative results of the intensive search of the Lizard area and knew that many were beginning to side with the British S.O.O., who maintained throughout that the intruder theory was bunk. There were other discouragements; the unparalleled strictness of the security orders hampered enquiries within the services. When it came to enquiries in civilian spheres, the situation was hopeless. The check on missing persons did not get beyond the police sergeant's desk in Texas or Cornwall. Hargreaves and Maitland, his only firm supporter of the intruder theory, were reduced to impotent rage that they should have the ear of their countries' chief executives, yet be unable to reach a police inspector. Both men read the files of the local newspapers, but it was obvious that nothing reliable could be expected from this source.

In the TOCSIN areas all appeared normal and quiet. The cover story told to commanding officers of watching ships was that the Russians were suspected of practicing some novel form of underwater surveillance in these areas before trying it out in other, more important waters . . . but the reports were always the same. "Patrol completed. Negative results."

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In a low-ceilinged pub in a fishing village on the Lizard peninsula, a small group of jerseyed fishermen were arguing over their pints. The air in the small room was blue with smoke and bad language.

"I tell 'ee, Jacob, never in arl me born days 'as 'e bin like this, an' I tell 'ee," a thick finger waved impressively, "I tell 'ee it be the oil from that there bloody *Torrey Canyon!*"

"You'm bloody thick, Ernie! My dear life! I knowed these warters afore you'm wet your first nappie, an' I tell 'ee, oil ain't the cause! I doan't rightly know what do be, but I reckon it arl be mixed up with they flyin' sarcers!"

Growls of disbelief greeted this opinion. The theorist was not dismayed and banged his tankard defiantly on the scarred oak table.

"All roight! Call me a bloody ole fule, but I knows what I sees —and I bain't the only 'un!" The speaker pointed at a silent figure, brooding in the chimney corner. "You'm ask old Bill Treloar—an' go an' check with they bloody coastguards! We'm do a praper job, tell 'um as sune as we get in, we do! But them's like you'm—bloody thick!"

A figure, prudently out of reach of the irate Jacob, mocked the old man. "That's roit, Jacob me 'andsome! You'm tellum arl about they lovely mermaids—"

"You'm shut yer trap!" Jacob's eyes glittered with rage; one work-hardened hand gripped his tankard convulsively. "You'm know bloody well tain't nothin' loik that!" He banged a meaty fist on the table, tankards jumped. "Me an' Bill, we *knows!* Harling in that bloody net, I tell 'ee the warter was *warm*—and doan tell me that be they oil! The lads up on the north coast 'ad the oil worser than we—but it ain't they 'as got the empty nets! Us'en!" He glared at his companions. With great deliberation he counted off on his fingers. "Plaice, gurnard, flounder, cod, turbot, mackerel—even they widgy little lance—arl gone! An' you'm all knows that be trew! There bain't be a bloody fish within twenny moiles o' the Lizard!"

On the other side of the low partition separating the public bar from the lounge, a well-dressed, dapper man listened intently. There was nothing more. He got up, drained his pink gin and placed the glass on the counter. He picked up his stick and hat.

"Good night!"

"Good night, sir!" The landlord looked at his wife, wiping glasses. "Don't know why they bother to change into civvies—got 'Navy' written all over him!"

Across the Atlantic, Hargreaves had also been doing some private investigation. He had just re-

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turned from the Arecibo area when Maitland's report on the Lizard fishing situation—and the warm water—arrived by teletype.

To the single-minded Hargreaves this was manna from heaven, and he heeded it. The Puerto Rican trip had produced nothing positive The only idea that occurred to him came while he was studying the coast. All along what he regarded as the suspect area, the shore sloped very steeply. He felt that the intruders could have written off this approach. The fact, he reasoned, that they had the ability to reach Earth was no guarantee that they could move easily on it, especially if he was right about their gravitational problems.

Maitland's reference to warm water, in particular, intrigued him. Could it be a by-product of the "force field" used to move the wrecks? He sent off an urgent request for Maitland to try to establish when the fisherman had noted this phenomenon. The disappearance of fish could be due to this same rise in temperature, but if so, why had they not returned when, presumably, the water cooled? Hargreaves was getting very nervy and bad tempered. Essentially a man of action, the waiting, the uncertainty played hell with his nerves.

Hardly back from Puerto Rico, he was off again within hours, flying down to Houston, doggedly convinced that Mission Control *must* be the prime target. To him the lack of evidence only showed that it had not been seen, not that it did not exist. He went as a civilian, and he was in a hurry, for this was Saturday, and among the data he had collected on NASA was the surprising item that the Center was open to the public on Sunday afternoons.

Hargreaves drove out of Houston in a rented car, heading south on the Galveston road. At Webster he turned off on to NASA Boulevard, noted the flat, low-lying ground, and caught the glint of not too distant water. He stopped the car, got out and looked around. New motels, aerospace contractors' offices, and apartments lined the road between the NASA site and the water—but there was a lot of room between the buildings. It was a very excited officer who drove on. If his theory was right, this place was wide open . . .

The guard on the gate waved him in. He felt a twinge of envy that anyone could work this way, unfettered by security. Following the arrows, he ended up in a vast parking lot in front of the administration block. He got out and surveyed the scene.

It was rather disappointing; like millions of others, he was familiar with the TV views of the control room, the rows of radar and TV scans, the control panels,

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the hunched, dedicated figures, this center of so many tense moments; but he did not recall seeing any pictures of the outside. Now he was looking at it, and it might have been any well-planned research center or hospital.

And then it hit him. Dutifully following the arrows, he was walking between two blocks and had a clear view of the buildings that lay beyond. They were all shapes—long and low, tall, rectangular, irregular, circular—but one thing was missing from his mental picture of Mission Control: there were no radars.

There were no radars! Not a single parabolic dish, not one ground array . . . Suddenly, Brett Hargreaves' mouth was dry; he felt as if he had been slugged in the stomach. He stood stock still, other visitors brushing past him; some looked at this strangely pallid man, staring at nothing, his mouth partly open.

Slowly he recovered, his training asserted itself. He looked again, panning methodically round. Still nothing. His gaze lighted on a white painted sign.

GEMINI & APOLLO VEHICLES —CINEMA—INFORMATION

Oblivious of his fellow visitors, he shouldered his way into the building, cursing his own ignorance, sweating with anxiety.

The large entrance, dotted with TV sets, had as its focal point two space vehicles. Long queues wound round the sides of the echoing hall, waiting their turn to stare uncomprehendingly at these twentieth-century marvels. At the far end, beneath tall windows that would not have disgraced a cathedral, he found the information desk.

A neatly dressed young NASA executive, identity badge well to the fore, smiled bravely at him. This was a tough assignment: parents with damn-fool questions, kids bawling because there were no autograph-signing astronauts standing around in spacesuits . . .

"Can I help you, sir?" This customer looked like another client for the first-aid section.

Hargreaves found his voice. "You—you—" Hell, what was the word? "You control spacecraft from here?"

What did this guy think they did with them? "Yes, sir, we do."

Hargreaves strove to get his voice on an even keel. "But there are no radars!"

It was a better question than some. "No, sir. A lot of people think we do the whole job from here. In fact, we remote-control mainly through Goddard Space Flight Center."

"Goddard?" Hargreaves stared stupidly at his informant. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, sir. I'm sure."

"Where the hell's that?" Hargreaves was angry with frustration.

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"Greenbelt, Maryland," said the executive stiffly. Hargreaves summoned up a thin smile. "Sorry. I guess I don't know where that is."

The NASA man thawed. "It's northeast of Washington."

"Oh! Is it near water—open water?"

"Around twenty miles from Chesapeake Bay, and much the same from the Potomac."

That struck Hargreaves as a long way, and for the time being he discarded Goddard. "Are there any other command stations which you control?"

The information officer eyed him curiously. This guy must be some sort of nut. Maybe an electronic nut, and there are none nuttier. "Sure. We have a world-wide net for transmitting commands—"

"Yes, but do you have any in the States?" Hargreaves was not interested in the world at large; he had enough problems. With a sudden flash of cunning, he said, "I thought there was a station on the coast of—of Florida."

"I expect you're thinking of Cape Kennedy. No, that is a launch facility only. The only one which I guess is pretty close to the coast is down near Corpus Christi, a couple of hundred miles southwest of here."

"And that's the only one?"

"Yep. I guess so."

"Well, thanks a lot," Hargreaves was reluctant to leave, but for sure this place no longer interested him. "Two hundred miles, you say?"

"About that."

"OK, thanks."

"You're welcome." The way that guy left, was he going to run all the way? "Yes, ma'am?"

"Say—where are the guys that fly these things . . ."

"Sorry, ma'am, they're all home, resting." Funny, that guy being interested in Corpus Christi . . .

And while Hargreaves tore south on US 59, Commander Maitland, R.N., was not exactly standing still.

Following on the fisherman's remark about warm water, Maitland had got the TOCSIN committee to agree to a program of temperature profiles in the suspect area. S.O.O. grumbled a lot; all this was playing hell with normal training. He grumbled still more forcefully when all the bathythermograph readings were in. Nothing abnormal.

Maitland was not deterred. If the heat was a by-product of the "force field", that would be quickly dissipated once the force ceased. But it did prove one thing—to him. He was now a regular visitor to the pubs around the Lizard and knew that the fishing within the area was still non-existent. So if the water tempera-

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ture was normal and the fish still stayed away, then they, at least, detected something. Sonar searches had produced nothing, and Maitland resolved to use divers. This meant straining the security regulations and was technically about as easy as searching Central Park in sunglasses, a foot at a time, in a snowstorm at night—not knowing what you were looking for. Then Maitland had what looked like a bit of luck. When an A/S helicopter from NAS, Culdrose, suffered engine failure and crashed in the sea east of the Lizard, Maitland had his excuse, and acted.

The diving school was denuded of all experienced men. Within three hours of the crash report, they were pitchforked into the emergency-duty frigate, which sailed the moment Maitland jumped aboard. En route, he briefed his teams. The helicopter, he explained, had been carrying secret equipment, which had probably been automatically ejected when the engine failed. It was a black box with various attachments—he was understandably vague on this point—and should not be touched as it contained a destruct device. More than that he could not, for security reasons, tell them. They were to look for anything unusual.

It was a very puzzled set of divers who took to the chill water south of the Lizard.

The position of the lost helicopter was well fixed, the distress IFF blip having been held on shore radar until impact, and a coastguard station had had a visual bearing on it. Although this position was rather closer to the shore than Maitland could have wished, he was confident of his ability to extend the search once the aircraft was located. This, to him, was a waste of time, but obviously his very thin story would collapse if he instructed the diving party not to look for the chopper. He sat alone in a corner of the darkened operations room of the frigate, biting back his impatience and hoping that underwater visibility would be good enough to justify television cameras. He had already arranged for the Navy U.W. TV team to be sent from Portsmouth.

The first report from the divers was encouraging. The visibility was, for that area, good; bottom markers were in position and the sweep had commenced. Maitland's spirits rose sufficiently to drink a cup of filthy coffee and to exchange a few remarks with the officer of the watch. It would not be long now . . .

But it was. Dusk was approaching when Maitland called off his tired men. Both team leaders—the divers were working in relays—were surprised at their lack of success and thought the coastguard bearing must be inaccurate.

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Maitland did not comment; he had another possibility in mind.

Before sailing, he had passed news of the impending search to Hargreaves; now he sent a signal to the chief of staff.

FROM MAITLAND. PLEASE INFORM THOSE CONCERNED HELICOPTER NOT LOCATED. SEARCH RESUMES AT FIRST LIGHT.

TOCSIN was far too hot even to use the word in a Secret signal. The C.O.S. would know that "those concerned" meant Hargreaves. Maitland turned in early. Sleep did not come easily, and when it did, his dreams were not pleasant. For much of the night he lay thinking, his mind going like a squirrel in a cage; that helicopter now interested him a lot, it *had* to be found . . .

In the cold gray of morning, softened only by a slight tinge of pink in the east, the divers went down again, Maitland watching in tight-lipped silence from the bridge. Light rain was falling, but he did not notice it.

By midday the divers were sure of one thing: the chopper was not within a mile of the radar position. Maitland ordered the second stage of the search, setting the frigate on a sonar sweep of the bottom along the coastguard's line of bearing, but the cold sensation in his stomach told him it was a waste of time. And nothing happened to alleviate that feeling.

Three times the frigate swept slowly along the line. Maitland and the ship's officers were confident of its accuracy, for it cut neatly through the radar fix, but they found nothing within ten miles of the point of maximum probability.

Maitland felt he had now done all that might reasonably be expected; now he could play the card he had held impatiently for twenty-four hours. He drew a line on his private chart, joining the TOCSIN focal point ashore to the radar-fix position, and extended it seawards. This line was a very different proposition. The one they had been sweeping ran roughly north and south, this new track ran west to east.

The slightly bored captain of the frigate was startled by the new orders, but the Navy is not that democratic, and it was plain that the staff officer was not prepared to discuss the matter.

The sweep began, and Maitland retired once more to his corner of the operations room, silent and watchful, listening to the eerie, hollow pinging sound of the sonar, watching the dim-lit instruments. His presence subdued the ops room staff. For them, this was just another of those crazy ideas dreamed up by the shore people, but Maitland's brooding figure, and his air of tension effectively cut out any comments that might occur to them.

For fifteen miles they searched,

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and got nothing. Another five miles, Maitland decided, and they would turn and sweep back, a half mile to one side of the base track. His glance flicked from the chart to the speed indicator; ten knots. In half an hour—

"What's that?" Maitland swung around. Every few seconds, for hours, the sonar had been sending out those probing bursts of sound, and Maitland had listened, almost unconsciously, to each one. Each time the sad note had dwindled and vanished into nothingness, lost in the black wastes of the sea. This time, faintly, but unmistakable to the trained ear, there was a tiny ping back, an echo. Before anyone could answer, the sonar operator called on the intercom:

"Contact, red one five, range one thousand!"

The officer of the watch looked enquiringly at Maitland, who nodded. The officer picked up his microphone.

"Sonar—ops room. Investigate. I'm reducing to five knots and remaining on the present heading." Outwardly the ship looked the same, but a string of orders set the men into action. In the engine room the powerful diesels were cut back, the motion of the ship changed with the new, low speed. On the bridge the navigator took very accurate Decca and radar fixes. Right aft, men prepared a marker buoy for dropping, and the first team of divers climbed laboriously into their suits.

Three times the frigate moved slowly over the target, refining the position. On the third run, a red-and-yellow marker buoy was laid. Now it was the diver's turn.

To the watching Maitland, an edge was added to his impatience by another factor: ominous clouds had begun to bank up in the southwest. All too soon the search might be stopped by bad weather. His final orders to the divers were to locate, identify the contact, and return. The search for the black box could wait . . .

Well aware that his action had now awakened the interest of the frigate's captain, Maitland remained hunched over the bridge rail, chin resting on his hands. Time dragged by, and he had to make a conscious effort not to look at his watch every few minutes.

And then the three bright yellow heads of the divers broke the surface, and the men scrambled aboard, flat, black flippers clacking on the steel deck. The leader, slipping gratefully out of his breathing gear, approached the waiting Maitland.

Maitland wasted even less time. "Well, Belcher?"

Belcher, red-faced, took several deep breaths before answering. "Sorry, sir, but it's bloody hot down there!"

"Hot?" Maitland fairly

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snapped the word. "What d'you mean—hot?"

The diver wiped his face with a towel. "Hard to be exact, sir, but the water seemed to be warm—damn near hot—near the wreck." He looked back at his companions, who nodded in agreement.

Maitland's jaw muscles twitched with the effort of restraint. "And the wreck?"

"It's the chopper, all right, sir. Saw the hull number—ninety-seven—that first position they gave us was all—"

"Yes, yes!" cut in Maitland impatiently. "I'll take that up ashore. The helicopter—what state was it in?"

"My mask steamed up like—it wasn't easy to see much, and as you said, we didn't touch it or go that close. I could see the machine was on its side, tail rotor gone, and the main rotor like a load of knitting. Didn't see any attachment for that box of tricks—"

"No, I don't expect you would." Maitland had a flash of inspiration and changed the subject slightly. "I suspect that the crash report confused the ejection point and the aircraft ditching position."

The diver dug thoughtfully into one ear with his little finger. "Well, sir, I don't rightly see how—"

Neither did Maitland; it was a very thin story, but better than none, and Maitland well knew that no rating expects a senior officer to be reasonable. "Probably not, Belcher, but we'll work on that assumption. Get some rest; we're returning to the original position, and I may want you all down for another search before nightfall."

Belcher watched the retreating figure. "Get some rest! All of a bloody hour!"

The marker buoy soon disappeared astern as the frigate, on a reverse course, headed back at speed for the original position. Time pressed, and Maitland had to think fast. Hargreaves' "force-field" theory must be right. If so, that report of heat showed the helicopter had only just been moved. He toyed with the idea of taking a series of sea temperatures, but that meant delay, and in any case that was cause, not effect. If there was a force-field, then it was reasonable to infer that it needed some sort of projector, for it was obvious the device worked along straight lines.

The situation was complicated by the fact that the projector was certainly not in the focal area of the lines. That was ashore, and Maitland had explored every inch of ground on foot and found nothing but undisturbed scrub and heather. So if it was not there, it must be in the arc of water to the south, and, if so, then the projector must be movable;

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otherwise, the lines would intersect at its position. Briefly, Maitland considered this arrangement, and wondered if it was deliberate. Concealment? He passed on to the concept of a movable projector. If it was mobile and used recently to shift the helicopter, there was a good chance that it was still in position, somewhere along a line drawn through the two helicopter positions, and it must be inshore of the crash position.

Maitland sought out the captain.

"I'd be obliged," his stiff formality killed any discussion stone dead, "if you steered an *exact*," he stressed the word, "reciprocal course through the original crash position, and continue for one mile at low speed—I suggest ten knots—then lower the sea-boat with one diving party aboard to investigate shorewards. I would like us to continue for a further mile, then drop the second party to work back towards the first."

If the captain had any thoughts on the subject, he kept them to himself. "We'll be cutting it fine; there's not all that much daylight left, and I'm not too happy about the weather."

"Neither am I," replied Maitland, shortly, "but it is all the time we have, and if the weather goes bad, we'll have plenty of time to recover our men."

"Very well, sir." He turned away. "Navigator, did you hear that? Good. Officer of the watch, pipe the sea-boat's crew, and tell the quarterdeck to stand by to drop two markers. Reduce speed to ten knots—and get the coxswain on the wheel; I don't want us waving all over the ocean."

Maitland completed his very unsatisfactory briefing of the divers. "For many reasons I cannot tell you exactly what you are looking for, I can only say you must watch for anything—*anything* unusual, and report at once. Do not, repeat, *do not* touch! Good luck."

Petty Officer Belcher, in charge of the boat party, muttered half to himself. "Good luck! My bloody oath! Need more than luck, need a bleeding crystal ball on this job!"

With both teams down, Maitland returned to his position on the wing of the bridge. Outwardly calm, he was beset with fears and anxiety. He had not lightly sent his men down to face the unknown and would willingly have gone himself, but this was a job for experts. Less than three hours of light left, and if he knew anything about it, it would be blowing a full gale by dawn. Further diving would be out of the question. In any case, it would be too late then. It had to be now, it—

A loud-speaker crackled. "Eggbox this is Eggbox One, over."

There was no mistaking the urgency in the operator's voice.

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Maitland grabbed the microphone. Eggbox One was the sea-boat.

"Eggbox One, pass your message, over!"

Without preamble, the boat answered. "The divers are up—one man is ill or injured—looks pretty bad." The man hesitated, then said, "Over."

Maitland replied calmly. "Confirm all diving team has been recovered, over."

The voice from the boat was steadier. "Yes, sir, all three are aboard, over."

"Rejoin ship—and keep a sharp lookout for our divers as you approach, over."

"Roger—wilco."

"Roger—out."

Maitland looked at the captain. "Is there time to recover our team before the boat gets in our danger area?"

The captain nodded. "That boat's a cow—yes, I reckon eight to ten minutes."

"Right. Surface them please."

Within seconds the three signal grenades—little more than fire crackers—echoed faintly in the operations room, but they were a lot less faint to the men on the sea bottom, who knew well what that signal meant: Surface immediately.

In five minutes, as the last man clambered up the net, the engines started to turn and the ship swung slowly to meet the oncoming boat.

The next three hours taxed Maitland to the limit. He watched impassively as the still, limp and white-faced diver was lifted gently from the boat and carried below to the sick bay. The doctor was adamant: Maitland could not see the man until he was fit, and the doctor would be the judge of that.

Maitland filled in time interrogating the rest of the divers. The ship's team had nothing to report, and Belcher was the only one of the boat party with anything significant.

"We were a few feet off the bottom, swimming in line abreast, about twenty feet apart, with me in the middle as guide. What with watching the compass and looking at the sea bed in my sector, I didn't see much else. I kept an eye on the other two, to make sure they didn't wander off course, but I wasn't watching them closely. First thing I knew was when I saw out of the corner of my eye that young Halliday had dropped astern a bit, so I looked across and saw he was in trouble."

"How do you mean, trouble?"

"Well, he wasn't swimming; his legs were a lot higher than his head." Belcher frowned, trying to recollect. "Funny thing was, it seemed to me that although he was floating upwards, he seemed lower than he had been last time I'd seen him."

Maitland fastened on that. "So

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it could be that he had gone lower, something happened, and he was drifting up when you saw him?"

"Yes, sir, that's about the size of it."

"Belcher," Maitland spoke with great earnestness, "I know it is hard, but think back—is there anything that you think might account for the accident?" Maitland tossed rank overboard. "Man to man, Belcher, I have to *know!* I don't give a damn how silly it may sound. You are the only one to see anything, and you are the senior and most experienced diver of the party. We haven't the faintest idea—apart from your view—of what happened. Think!"

Petty Officer Belcher was shocked by the sudden change in Maitland's manner. The casual, withdrawn mask of the dapper commander had dropped, revealing a burning intensity which few, least of all the diver, would have suspected. He eyed Maitland carefully, thinking, weighing his words.

At last he spoke. "Well, sir, if you put it like that—" He shut his eyes, and screwed up his face in concentration, then shook his head. "I can't be sure. Light down there plays some funny tricks, especially when you're swimming close to the bottom, but I've a feeling—it's no more than that—that just before I spotted Halliday, the sandy bottom seemed to shift slightly." He smiled, half apologetically. "Course, I know it must have been an optical illusion, but just for a second—less—it seemed as if the bottom moved a few inches from left to right."

"That would mean the movement was towards Halliday?"

"Yes—if it was movement. I'd say the most likely reason was me being pushed sideways in the opposite direction."

"But you don't believe that, do you?"

"No, sir," the diver confessed, "I don't. A sudden current can move you, but not that fast, or without you noticing something like pressure or the water being warmer or colder."

"Yes," said Maitland pensively. "Was there anything else—what about disturbed water, mud, fish?"

"No, the water was clear as a bell. Fish now; funny you should mention that. Come to think of it, I haven't seen one all day."

Maitland was himself again. "Indeed? Well, thank you very much, P.O.; I'd be grateful if you'd think over that dive again. Write it down—all of it—never mind how fanciful it may seem. And check Halliday's suit and gear very carefully; let me know of any defects and oddities—" He gestured impatiently. "I can't tell you what to look for, use your eyes and experience, P.O. Thank you."

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The doctor's preliminary report cleared up nothing. The diver had inhaled some water, but otherwise was physically unhurt. On Halliday's mental state the doctor was not so certain. The patient was badly disorientated, deep in shock, his speech unintelligible; and although there was no sign of retinal damage, his vision appeared to be affected. With luck, Maitland would be able to see him in the morning. The diver was young and very healthy; a night's sleep should work wonders —unless the shock was even more deep-seated than the doctor feared.

To end a bad, tense and frustrating day, Belcher reported that he had gone over every inch of the unfortunate diver's equipment, and there was nothing wrong with it.

Oblivious of the violent motion of the frigate as she reeled and plunged in the rising storm, Maitland lay wedged in his bunk, thinking.

"The sand seemed to shift."

Maitland, trying to see beyond the diver's words, shivered despite the heat in the cabin. Alone, staring into the darkness, he admitted to himself he was scared, deadly scared.

He may have dozed; certainly he was unaware of the passage of time when the curtain was drawn back and a messenger entered and knocked on the side of the bunk. Instantly Maitland was fully awake.

"Yes, what is it?"

"You're wanted in the sick bay, sir."

"Right." Automatically Maitland glanced at his watch; 3 a.m. In less than a minute he was in trousers and jacket, feet jammed into half-boots, and on his way, adjusting a silk scarf to hide his pyjamas when the rolling of the ship allowed him a free hand. He was met by a grave-faced doctor.

"I don't like the look of Halliday, sir. I don't know why, but he is near total collapse. Temperature and pulse way over the top, breathing very irregular, and in delirium. Now he's quiet, but there are sudden bursts of speech, he tried to shout." The doctor shook his head. "I can't make any sense of it, but you may—and it could be your only chance."

The two men stared at each other in the semidarkness of the sick bay, both holding on, legs braced apart against the wild motion. Behind them the four gimbal-mounted cots swayed smoothly. Three were in darkness, empty; above the fourth a shaded lamp cast a subdued light on the figure of the diver. Beside the cot, sitting in a chair lashed to a stanchion, was a sick-berth attendant, watching the pallid face of the diver, and mopping the sweat from the sinking man's brow.

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"Is the S.B.A. doing anything?"

"No, not really, trying to keep the poor devil as comfortable as possible. There's nothing we can do; he's in this battle on his own."

"Right. I can do the S.B.A.'s job."

The doctor looked intently at Maitland. "Yes, sir, I'm sure you can." He divined the senior officer's thoughts. "I'll be in my office and the S.B.A. in the dispensary. Call out if in any doubt."

Maitland began his vigil. From time to time the doctor peered out of his cubby hole, and in due course the S.B.A. gave Maitland a cup of mahogany-colored tea which smelt faintly of antiseptic, and all the time the commander watched, gently mopping the sailor's face, his own impassive, revealing nothing of his thoughts. He accepted that he had given the order that had led to this man's state. To say that he was sorry would be grossly inadequate, but equally, he did not regret it. He too could be ordered to risk, and if need be, lose his life, for that was the way of the Service, and Maitland would obey as unhesitatingly as Halliday had done. The real question, that must always nag any officer, tore at Maitland's mind; was it justified?

Looking at the lined, tormented face, Maitland concluded it was a necessary risk. It would only become pointless if Halliday failed to pass on what he knew. An hour passed, the doctor examined the diver again, grimaced on reading his temperature, and left Maitland to his vigil. Outside, beyond the thin steel walls, the sea pounded with increasing fury. Situated amidships, the motion was less violent in the sick bay, but Maitland's legs ached with the effort of keeping him in his chair. Then, near dawn, Halliday's eyes fluttered, opened, shut, then opened again. His head feebly turned, and Maitland saw the terrible blankness in the sailor's eyes.

By some sixth sense the doctor appeared, took one look and went into the dispensary, reappearing with a drink and managed to reach the other side of the cot without spilling it. With great care, he got the diver to drink.

The doctor brushed back the sweat-sodden hair as he laid Halliday's head gently on the pillow. "That may do him some good."

For ten minutes the diver lay motionless, then with a sudden access of strength, he spoke, quietly and slowly at first, then with gathering speed.

"Breathing . . . breathing is the secret . . . good breathing, good diving . . . watch it, Lofty, that's my bloody beer! . . . beer's as poor as haddock water . . . got a mouth like the inside of an Ethiopian wrestler's jockstrap . . . no

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diving for me today . . . blue . . . blue light—" The delirious voice rose sharply, then broke off. There was a long silence before it began again.

"She's no bloody good, Lofty . . . check air bottles, adjust strap . . . all this lovely diving! Civvies pay to do it . . . spit in your mask . . . feet together . . . that's Ginger, can't miss that big beer gut of his . . . beer . . . Ginger Belcher, so bloody old he remembers Nelson . . . good diver . . . diving now . . . check depth, watch Ginger . . . on course, there's the signal, bloody crazy game this is, looking for what?"

Maitland's heart thumped, the jumble was getting less, Halliday was reliving the last dive. Desperately Maitland willed the sailor to go on.

"Level off . . . can't see Lofty very well, but it's clear . . . sandy bottom—what the hell are we looking for? Ginger signaling me lower—what does he want me to do, bloody well walk? Up a bit? Why can't he make up his mind? Take it easy, long way to go . . . flat bottom, sand, nothing, not a damn thing . . . flat, very flat . . . hey, hang on, it *is* flat, flatter than that, Jack . . . never seen anything like this, that dandified brass hat said anything odd, this . . . go down a bit, steady, this is bloody queer, flat as a billiard table—Jesus! What's that?"

Halliday's head came off the pillow, one hand grasped Maitland's hand hard, the sightless eyes stared with fierce intensity at nothing, the voice was soft, high, charged with incredulity, only faintly tinged with fear.

"What the hell? Looks like a bloody great fishbone . . . silver-colored fishbone . . . where is it? Gone! Gone where—into the sodding sand? Yes! See the faint print—herringbone . . . down a bit . . . whoever heard of a herringbone four feet across, and silver? Seeing things . . . Lofty'll say I've been on the beer again . . . Closer—there! No bloody marks—but I *did* see it! Closer, clo—arrh!" The diver clapped both hands to his eyes, screamed, arching his back in agony. The doctor came running.

"My eyes! God, the pain, the pain! Blue light . . ." Slowly the diver relaxed, his voice dropped to a whisper. "Blue light . . . in my head . . . blue . . ."

The voice weakened, trailed away into a faint, unintelligible murmer, and was silent. The tense hands, still clenched over the eyes, gradually relaxed, half opened, slid helplessly down away from those still, staring eyes.

Tired, depressed and very irritable when he reached his office, Maitland found the inevitable pile of paper—and the chief of staff wanted him.

"Ah, Maitland. Read Har-

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greaves' latest signals first; that'll save time."

The first said:

HOUSTON NOT A TOCSIN SITE OR TARGET BUT COMMAND RADAR FACILITY CORPUS CHRISTI TEXAS HAS CLASSIC LIZARD/ARECIBO PATTERN. INVESTIGATING.

Maitland frowned. Investigating what? His frown deepened on reading the second.

ATTEMPTING TO PROVOKE REACTION IN CORPUS CHRISTI LOCATION. REPORT FOLLOWS.

It didn't; the last message simply said:

IMPERATIVE WE HAVE JOINT MEETING SOONEST FLYING OVER TUESDAY PM.

"Tuesday?"

"Today." The chief of staff well knew days of the week were meaningless at sea. "Successful trip?"

The S.O.(I) wearily ran a hand through his gray hair. "It has produced results, sir. I need a little time to get it sorted out."

"I can wait," answered the chief of staff. "I'm sure it's bad—in fact I can't imagine good TOCSIN news. As long as you can be ready for this—"

The phone interrupted him.

"Yes?" The C.O.S. listened, his eyes on Maitland. "Yes, got it, twenty-one hundred. Bye."

"Right on cue. Hargreaves plus a high-powered Pentagon type are flying over in some supersonic dingbat. Be here by nine p.m." He got up. "I'm off to see the admiral and fix the meeting for 9:15. He won't like it much, but that's tough. Still, I hope Hargreaves can justify this panic."

"If he can't, I can," said Maitland somberly.

Hargreaves' "high-powered Pentagon type" turned out to be the Chief of Naval Operations. A further surprise was the unexpected arrival of the C.N.O.'s British opposite number, the First Sea Lord. Security forbade that it should be known these two top men were meeting, and apart from each other and Hargreaves, no one knew of their coming until they arrived.

The C.N.O. opened the meeting.

"Gentlemen. Apart from our TOCSIN group, people in the Pentagon think I'm away for the day on family business. I have to ride that very uncomfortable plane back at first light, so let's not waste time. Hargreaves, go ahead."

Hargreaves, his civilian suit badly crumpled, unshaven and with bloodshot eyes, got awkwardly to his feet.

"We asked for this meeting for mutual updating and to consider the situation in the light of that updating." He looked down at his notes. "Corpus Christi is on the Texan coast, southwest of Houston. We have there a command

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and tracking station, remote-controlled by NASA Houston, when space vehicles are being operated. Houston does not radiate, it remote-controls stations world-wide. Corpus Christi is the only station in the States that is close to water. Nearby is a Navy air base. Off Corpus Christi I found all the familiar TOCSIN conditions; wreck movement, fish avoidance, thermal variation. A TOCSIN wreck chart was made, a focal point—again in the vicinity of the space antennas—located, and an arc for force-field projectors estimated. With the C.N.O.'s approval, I fixed a test."

Despite his fatigue, Hargreaves managed a faint smile at the evident disapproval on Maitland's face.

"The Navy air base had an old landing craft. On the upper deck I bedded a smoke candle and a dye marker in a block of paraffin wax, which was strapped down. I figured that the heat of the force field would melt the wax and release the candle and marker, pinpointing the time the move began. Three helicopters were fitted with underwater TV cameras—in twelve hours—and the pilots briefed. They thought they were in for a screwy type of antisub exercise.

"To give maximum daylight, we towed the craft out at dawn and sank it in the sensitive area. The TV helicopters were at instant readiness less than five minutes from the site; the wreck was under constant surveillance from ordinary helicopters. Then we waited.

"We waited five hours, forty-eight minutes, then got the signal that the red smoke candle had been sighted. I led off in the first TV helicopter, the others in line astern. We spotted the candle and the dye marker, which showed that the rough prediction of direction made from a study of wreck movement in the area was correct. We stationed ourselves half a mile apart along the estimated line of force and towed our cameras slowly away from the wreck, towards the shore. My helicopter was leading, and therefore furthest from the landing craft. The picture was difficult to evaluate, and later examination of our film has revealed nothing."

Hargreaves paused and drank a little water. Maitland suspected the US officer wanted a chance to stabilize his voice.

"We had been moving very slowly for maybe ten minutes, all cameras working. Then there was one short call from the second—middle—helicopter, "engines overheating". We saw little, but the third ship later reported that the engines of number two appeared to catch fire, the machine lost height, and blew up before hitting the sea."

Again Hargreaves paused, then

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went on in a hard dry voice. "We continued our search. I ordered the third helicopter to sweep on into number two's section. It was in this area that we obtained results. I have here one print from the film—there has been no time for more—which I will pass around. It is a poor picture, but we are convinced that this is the first concrete evidence we have of the existence of intruders. The lost helicopter: I believe that was accidental. I suspect his camera or cable touched this device, some of the enormous power flashed up the cable, overheated and exploded the fuel tanks."

Abruptly, Hargreaves sat down and passed a photograph to his neighbor. The C.N.O. got up.

"Gentlemen. Hargreaves has stated the facts. All US TOCSIN staff are completely convinced that we are dealing with an alien force. When you have seen the print, I think you too will be sure. If we do agree, then we must consider very urgently what advice to offer our chief executives."

The print reached Maitland. As Hargreaves had said, it was poor. The object was not fully visible, its outline cloudy, blurred.

Maitland knew what he was looking at: Halliday had not died in vain. The First Sea Lord was speaking to him.

"Yes, sir." Maitland stood up. "I too have news."

That was months ago. Today the TOCSIN group is better organized; now there are forty members, many discreetly drafted into key positions. One sits on the USAF UFO investigation committee—he is the only Air Force member—and another is a senior police officer at Scotland Yard with access to Interpol. The CIA has been infiltrated at a high level. There are three Russian members.

Hargreaves coordinates all Western hemisphere surveillance. Maitland does the same for the Eastern half. He still looks young, but his hair is turning white . . .

How do I know all this? Well, not all TOCSIN personnel are convinced that this tight conspiracy of silence is the best or the most expedient policy. Four intruder sites have been positively identified, but as yet nothing further has happened—so far as we know. It may be that they have what they want and seek no more. It may be that they have a totally different time scale. It may be that they are not yet ready for the next stage . . .

And I, for one, think the world should know. It may be the biggest threat our creaking civilization has met. I believe it is far too serious to be left in the hands of forty men. Naturally, most people will dismiss this story as sheer fantasy, except the TOCSIN group.

They can say nothing, only wait and watch—and pray. ◄

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"That's alright, boy! Here, boy! Forget it, boy! C'mon, boy . . ."

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Harry Harrison does a variety of things well, including translations, anthologies (among the most recent are SF AUTHORS' CHOICE *and* BEST SF: *1969), novels and short stories. There is also a lively diversity in his fiction, and we're especially pleased to offer this example of Mr. Harrison in a not wholly serious mood. (Remember "Captain Honario Harpplayer, RN," March 1963?) The story below will be included in a new Harrison collection,* ONE STEP FROM EARTH, *forthcoming from Macmillan.*

WIFE TO THE LORD

by Harry Harrison

HER NAME WAS OSIE AND ALL agreed that she was by far the loveliest girl in the settlement of Wirral-Lo, a place that had been long known for the stunning beauty of its women. Wirral-Lo, perched on the high saddle of the inhospitable mountains of the planet called Orriols, had little else to offer. This beauty was a considerable asset and well guarded. When Osie ventured out of doors, she wore a cloak of even heavier leadcloth than anyone else, as well as a wide-brimmed hat and thick dark glasses, all to protect her from the hard radiation of the burning blue-white sun. Inside, in the evenings, everyone appreciated the resulting fairness of her skin, the shine of her long black hair, the round bare perfection of her up-pointed full breasts. At these times her arms were covered—there were strict rules about that—and the overlapping layers of her full skirt chimed with little silver bells, while her eyes hid always behind round dark glasses. But what could be seen was very lovely, and the workers with the burnt patches on their faces and necks, skin-cancer scars and keloids, exacted a great pleasure from looking at her unmarred beauty. They were all very sad when it was decided that she would be sent away to school.

This would be costly, but ev-

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eryone looked upon it as a good investment. Centuries earlier they had emigrated to this patch of land to grow the pilloy plants which ripened only in the Orriols soil under the harsh actinic sun. The air was thin, but their ancestors had lived for centuries in the great heights of the South American mountains so this was no hardship. Their chests were wide and deep and they could breathe the air. The hard radiation was something else, and it had done them no good. Their numbers had not increased the way they should, and there were never enough people to work the land well. They needed expensive power equipment, and the sale of the pilloy drug from the plants never earned quite enough. So they were all happy to make small sacrifices and to groom and care for Osie because they knew that she would fetch a very good bride price indeed.

She was a young girl, fighting to control her tears, when she waved good-by and stepped through the matter transmitter and emerged in Bern in the mountains on Earth and attended her school. One year later, to the day, she reappeared from the screen. A poised young woman not given to foolish tears of emotion.

At a great dinner, where all attended, this woman they had known only as a girl was much admired. Her manners were perfect, if slightly cool to them since they were only workers, her graceful beauty mature and breath-taking. She had a certificate from the school proclaiming that she had passed her courses with the highest grades, had impeccable social manners, had been trained in beauty culture, and was *virgo intactus,* having never been out of sight of the school authorities during that entire year. She was ripe perfection. They looked with awe at the hair, the breasts, the perfect manners, and saw tractors, harrows, cultivators, and bag after bag of fertilizer.

"Here is the advertisement we will place," her father said after the last course and the tables had been cleared. There were shocked gasps, cries of approval.

"The picture—so perfect!"

"The measurements—exact to the centimeter!"

"The price—higher than any ever seen before!"

She looked down demurely into her wine glass and just a tiny smile touched her lips. A wave of affection passed over the tables, and they would have kissed and hugged her with gratitude if there had not been some fear of damaging her, even slightly, or removing some of the *intactus.* She had never been kissed, even by her parents, since her fifth birthday. She was ready, ready.

Within three days the first an-

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swer came. There were others of course, goodness knows how many, but the marriage journal turned away all of them that could not meet the reserved price. A small squad of men in black came from the matter transmitter and looked about suspiciously as they were greeted in the rude hall that was the largest building, though they warmed considerably when Osie stepped gracefully before them. The lawyers scrutinized her papers, the doctors examined her under the watchful eyes of her people, and the business manager argued the price. It was all going very well indeed when another man stepped from the screen and stamped a booted foot.

"You, strangers, clear out. She will be my bride."

The men in black grew cold faced and watched while Osie's father addressed the caller. He was quite polite since the man obviously had money. A lot of it. His clothes were of the richest fabrics, his jewelry, simple diamonds and emeralds, of a size and cut that was quite astonishing. His blond hair, silken soft and shoulder length, blended into his graceful mustaches, which he touched lightly with his knuckle.

"Might I enquire your name?" her father asked, with a small bow that seemed right for the occasion.

"Well you might. I am Jochann, only Lord of Maabarot. I seek your daughter for my Lady."

That no one present had heard of Maabarot was not strange because, since the advent of matter transmission, mankind had spread through the galaxy like chaff before a wind and many were the worlds that were inhabited.

"We were here first," one of the lawyers said. "You will leave."

"I will stay," Jochann said, and flipped his ornate swagger stick with his fingertips. It was apparently well weighted and far heavier than it looked because it rapped the lawyer on the temple and the man dropped instantly unconscious to the floor.

"I will match their offer and go ten thousand credits more," Jochann said, and pulled a large bundle of currency from his wallet and dropped it on the table. "Not only that, but the obese creature these jackals represent is seventy years old with the skin of a wart hog."

"Is this true?" Osie asked, speaking for the first time, and her voice rang in the same register as the bells upon her skirt.

"Not at all true!" one of the remaining lawyers said, keeping well back out of range. "You can see yourself, from this picture."

"True enough for me," Osie said, dropping the picture with the slightest curl to her delicate lips. She ground it underfoot as she turned to face Jochann.

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"You may have me, my Lord, but I do not come cheap. For this basic price I will be yours, but never in spirit because I will always think that you put your money before your love. I ask you to be generous . . ."

"How generous?"

"At least fifty thousand credits more."

"This generosity is not cheap."

"Neither is my love. I see in you the kind of man I could love with passion, and I feel that I would enjoy doing that. But I can do it only if I do not grieve for the poor state of my people. Pay them this small sum and you will find a new life of passion opening up for you."

She took one step forward, raised his unresisting hand with hers, turned it palm up and bent forward to touch it with the tip of her pointed tongue. Jochann groaned aloud and fumbled in his wallet.

"I am convinced," he said hurling bundle after bundle of currency onto the table, scarcely aware of what he was doing. "Prepare the marriage papers. Let the ceremony be done. I cannot wait long."

"I have been waiting for years," she said into his ear, in a voice as husky as his. "Saving up my passion for you."

He groaned again and sought action chasing the black-frocked men from the room, hurling the last one bodily into the matter transmitter.

Then Jochann regained his control and went stolidly through the marriage ceremony, signing all the forms and giving his bride a cool peck upon the cheek. But he would not stay for the planned banquet.

"Flesh can stand but so much," he said through tight-clenched teeth, and rooted in his seemingly inexhaustible wallet for some more money. "I hope an additional payment will stay your grief at our nonattendance of this function, but stern duty calls. We must go."

They understood and were filled with compassion. Osie's bags appeared and, after Jochann had punched out his number, shielding the keys with his body, were pushed through. He nodded goodby, gave his bride his arm, and they stepped through as well.

The room they stepped out into was small, windowless, dusty and barren. Osie, with mannered perfection, said nothing. She watched with casual interest as her new husband secured a great lock on the transmitter controls, unbolted the door, and led her into another room. The heavy door was then closed behind them and secured with a good half dozen more locks. If this action puzzled her, she did not comment upon it but looked around at the large and tastefully furnished room, the-

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focus of attention of which was a great bed with turned-backed sheets.

"I knew you would be my bride," he grated, half choked with passion, his arms about her, leaning her towards the bed. In an instant he realized her body was hard as a board, unyielding, her expression blank. He reluctantly released her and she straightened her clothing before she spoke.

"You will have my bags brought to my robing room and have me shown where it is. I will prepare myself carefully because this should not be done with unseemly haste. Prepare yourself as well because it will be two or three days at least before you leave this room."

While she spoke she slowly raised the black glasses that always concealed her eyes, and they were wide and dark and deep with such promise of passion that he almost drowned in their depths. Then her lips burnt with fire on his, then they were gone, and he nodded, incapable of speech, and pointed wordlessly to a door set into the far wall.

The first week went very well for Osie. The school in the Alps of Earth had trained her well, as well as they could without practical lessons, and she found she had a natural aptitude for this sort of thing. Besides that, it was a relief to change her status at last. The only virginal pleasure she had previously enjoyed was anticipation, which is rather unsatisfactory over a period of years. So now she used all the exercises she had been taught, that first day and night, and then the various restimulating exotica prescribed for waning powers, and it was more than seven days in all before she awoke and found her husband gone from the marital couch. She yawned and stretched, sated—and at peace with the world, and pressed the button beside the bed.

Previously the curtains had been drawn and invisible hands had silently delivered the desired food and drink. This time she drew back the draperies and watched, relaxed against the pillows, as an attractive girl in serving costume came hesitantly into the room.

"Some wine," she ordered. "Light, cool and refreshing, and something to eat. What do you suggest?"

The maid mutely hung her head.

"Come, come, it is all right to speak. I am your mistress and wife of the Lord. So, what food?"

The girl shook her head dumbly and Osie began to feel anger.

"Speak up, you are not mute."

To which the girl responded by nodding her head vigorously and pointing to her throat.

"You poor thing," Osie said, in-

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stantly compassionate. "And so young and pretty too. Then bring me something nice, I do believe that I have quite an appetite."

The food arrived and she ate well, afterwards enjoying a long bath and the languid pleasures of doing her nails and hair. She had a lifetime to see this world, her new home, and was in no hurry. Her husband would enjoy showing it to her, and she wanted his pleasure as well. This marriage had a fortuitous beginning.

Towards evening the tall bronze doors were thrown wide and Jochann entered, striding firmly. He was an immensely strong man, so he did not appear fatigued, though it must be admitted that there were deep-cut dark circles under his eyes. Osie raised her arms and they kissed, but he stepped back swiftly as he felt the warm tides of passion arising once again.

"Enough, at least for the moment," he said. "My wife, I must show you something of your world, and the people of Maabarot will want to see their Lady. If you will dress in something unusually fine, we will step out onto a balcony and wave to the throng that has been gathering for three days, their enthusiasm undiminished by time." He touched a button on the wall and the roar of countless throats could be heard.

"They sound pleased."

"It is a great event in their lives. After the balcony, we shall go to a dinner where you will meet the higher-placed people of this world. Before you do that, there is something I must tell you."

Jochann paced back and forth, his fingers working unknowingly at the gold threads of his tunic, a frown—was it of apprehension?—wrinkling his brow.

"You have some confession perhaps? Something you did not want to tell me until we were safely married?" There was a certain coldness to her words.

"My love!" He dropped to his knees before her, taking her hands in his. "Nothing like that, I assure you. I am the Lord of Maabarot, as I told you. All the resources of this rich planet are mine, and I will share every part of them with you. I have concealed nothing. Other than my people's attitude towards me."

"They do not like you?"

"Quite the opposite. They adore me." He rose, dusted his knees, and when his chin was raised, his face became set in an expression of calm nobility. "In fact they rather venerate me. You must understand that they are simple people, and they look upon me with a certain awe."

"How very nice. Perhaps, as did the ancient Egyptians or Japanese, they consider you an offspring of the sun-god?"

"Like that, only a bit better."

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"What could be better?"

"They believe that I *am* God."

"How very nice," she told him, showing only interest and no signs of laughter, disbelief, or scoffing, since the Bern school had been a good one.

"Yes, it is. A burden, of course, since my slightest whim is law and I must not abuse that power."

"Do *you* believe that you are God?"

"Well you might ask!" He smiled. "Logically, as a man of science, of course not." He frowned. "Though at times I have strange feelings. The pressure of their utter belief is so strong. But we will talk of that some other time."

"Would you mind telling me how this situation came about?"

"I'm a little vague on the earlier details myself. Some remote ancestor of mine came into possession of the only matter transmitter on this world and in some way concealed its existence from the people. To the uneducated the things this device can accomplish do seem miraculous. Tons of grain vanish into a tiny room far smaller than their total bulk. Strange and wondrous devices appear in their place. Maabarot dozes away the centuries in a paternistically feudal twilight, and the only man with any knowledge of science is the Lord, God, myself. And of course the Lord's wife, miraculously appeared from heaven to be His consort. A Lord's wife is always from another planet. A Lord has but one son, who becomes God in his father's place when the elder Lord returns to heaven. You will have but one son. You will have no daughters."

"I shall miss them. I always did like big families."

"I am sorry. But you will obey me without rancor?"

"Of course. Did I not swear to obey you? Instead of a large family I shall lavish my not inconsiderable love on my single son, which is only right considering that some day he will be God. I am not displeased."

"Wonderful! My wife is a jewel in ten million. Shall we to the balcony?"

"I will call the maid to dress me. What is her name?"

"Bacjli."

"How did she lose her powers of speech?"

"I told her she could no longer speak; therefore she cannot. The people sincerely believe in God on this planet. The house servants are illiterate and cannot speak; thus they can reveal none of the secrets and details of existence here."

"Is this necessary?"

"It is the law and the way it always has been. I am as bound to it as they are. They believe it a small sacrifice and thousands vie for positions in my palace."

"There are many things that I must become used to."

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"Being wife to God is second in difficulty only to being God."

"How nicely you phrase it."

The reception that greeted the new Lady when she stepped out onto the balcony was chaotic and passed quickly into hysteria when she condescended to speak to them. But the Lord raised his hand and ordered that peace descend on his people, and it did. Partly because of the power of suggestion but mostly because he released tranquilizing gas into the crowd by operating the remote-control unit fastened to his belt. The divine couple descended to the banquet flushed with excitement and entered to the wail of trumpets to see a sea of bent backs. Once God and his mate had been seated the nobility straightened up and stepped forward, one at a time as the seneschal called their names, to genuflect and kiss the ring that Osie wore. She sipped iced wine all the while and smiled, counterpoint to Jochann's godly grimness, and they all loved her with their entire hearts. God, tired of the introductions, halted them with a raised finger and the meal began.

It was a delicious repast that never got past the seventeenth course, which consisted of tiny birds roasted in honey. The seneschal reappeared and silence fell as he rapped his staff of office loudly on the marble floor.

"Oh, God, Father of us all, who rules with lightning and love, we beg to inform You that Your high court is at this time rendering justice."

"I shall come," he said, rising, and offering his arm to Osie. "Hell, right in the middle of the meal. But it is one of those things that just has to be done. God can't skimp His work, you know. The walk may help our appetites, so all is not lost."

The guests bowed and backed away, then followed their Lord and His Lady in a murmuring crowd to the Palace of Justice where the high court sat. Jochann led his bride to a small balcony tastefully decorated with plaster clouds to resemble a seat in heaven. They sat on plush thrones while the judges filed in, black garbed and cloaked in righteousness like all judges everywhere. The clerk spoke in a high tenor, half singing the words.

"The judges return. The defendant will rise."

For the first time Osie noticed a bald man in torn gray clothing who sat in a spike-guarded box. He was so burdened with chains that the soldiers had to help him to his feet. Then they stepped back to their positions leaving him swaying alone.

"Prisoner," the clerk sang, "you have been accused of the most awful crime known to man. You have sinned badly, damning your-

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self from your own mouth. You are guilty of heresy. You have denied the existence of God and the judges will now pass sentence."

"I'll say it again!" the defendant shouted in a cracked hoarse voice. "I'll say it right to his face, I will. He is no more God than I am. A man, just a man!"

The crowd howled and pressed forward seeking his blood, and the many guards fought to restrain him.

"My fault," God told his wife. "The market for farm products keeps falling and I have tried to modernize the economy. I've had a pilot plant built for the manufacture of electronic components. But science is a curse in a feudal society. This man was supervisor there and his technical know-how has led him into theological sin."

"Will you show mercy?" she asked, frightened by the blood lust of the crowd.

"I cannot, for I am a stern God and must be feared."

The judges rose and chanted together.

"We the judges, find the defendant, guilty as charged, and do surrender him, to the hands of, the living God. To die at once, let justice prevail!"

"Justice!" the prisoner screeched as Jochann slowly rose, his words clear in the breathless hush. "Superstition, that's all it is. Suggestion, make me think I'm going to die. But I won't do it, no sir. I'm not going to drop dead just because he says die . . ."

"Die," Jochann intoned and leveled his finger.

The man screamed, writhed horribly in his chains, and died.

"How terrible," Osie said. "The power of suggestion . . .?"

"Works with most of them. But I take precautions with the hard cases. Fifty thousand volts wired right through those chains. Remote control. Let's go back before the food gets cold."

For some reason Osie had no more appetite and left the banquet soon after sipping some wine. In her dressing room she prepared herself for the rest of the evening's festivities and tried to forget the recent events. But she could not. Then she tried to rationalize the execution and did much better. Obedience to the law and the constituted authorities. Without obedience we would have only chaos. She convinced herself well enough to greet her husband, God, with renewed passion when he returned. God's in his bedroom, all's right with the world.

"I believe I am what is called a benevolent despot," Jochann said next day as they rode side by side through the streets of the town below the castle. Stout bearers carried their palanquin on husky shoulders and spear-carrying soldiers kept the cheering crowd at

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bay. Jochann nodded to each side as he talked, smiling automatically, and throwing out handfuls of coins of small denomination.

"How very nice for you," Osie said, bestowing smiles as well, "and for me too of course. But are the people happy?"

"As pigs in a parsley patch. Because I really am benevolent. They have all of the benefits of science without the foul by-products or responsibilities. No smog, no pollution, no industry. No endless years at school to compete for a place in a technocratic society. No schools for that matter, so happy children are everywhere. Maabarot is a paradise and they are appropriately grateful."

"You have a crime problem?"

"None. People obey the law when a living God is looking over their shoulders."

"They are not hungry?"

"Food and clothing and shelter for all by God's law."

"They are not sick?"

"The temples, fitted with the most modern chirurgical and medical machines, cure them all. Miraculously. They are appropriately grateful."

"They complain about nothing?"

"Nothing. The skies ring with hosannas. They live in paradise and are in no hurry to get to heaven."

"The man who died . . .?"

"A malcontent. They are very few. On the bell-shaped curve of happiness there are always a handful who grumble at paradise. But even in dying they serve a function by setting an example for the happy hordes. Fat, sunburned, well fed, stupid. They want for nothing. Hear how they acclaim me!"

And shout they did. And weep with joy and hold up their children to be blessed and kiss the ground over which He had passed and swoon with passion. It was all very satisfactory. In the Street of Goldsmiths priceless trinkets were forced upon them. In the Bazaar of Jewelers cut stones fell like precious rain. Their visit was a triumph and they returned breathless with pleasure, drank cool wine, and before they knew it were celebrating the triumph with greater triumphs in bed.

Time fled by. When the pastoral pleasures palled, they would slip away to another planet for the theater or a concert or other civilized entertainment. Not often, for here there was yachting, riding, climbing, banqueting, hunting, fishing, endless opportunities for sport and joy. A week, a month, and then a year slipped by unnoticed, and in the privacy of their bedchamber, after the great celebratory banquet, Jochann took her hand in his and, after kissing it, said, "It is time to think about our heir."

"I have been thinking about

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him and wondering when the blessed event might occur."

"Nine months from now if you agree with me."

"I do," she said and threw her jar of Pills through the open window. "Shall we begin?"

"Not quite yet. We must return to Earth to the *Vereinigte Vielseitgkeit Fruchtbarkeit Krankenhaus* in Zurich. The most famous fertility clinic in all the worlds."

"You have doubts about my fertility?" she asked in a voice with a cold steel edge to it.

"Never, my love, never! I have no doubt that from your fruitful womb could spring girls, twins, quintuplets. You are capable of anything."

"I understand." She kissed him. "One boy. Shall we go?"

"I'll dial the number now."

It was more like a birth than a conception, and Jochann paced the waiting room floor for long hours before he was summoned. The doctor was bald and emotionless and reading from the report.

"Male offspring, one, no broken genes, selected from finest traits available, now past the third cell-division and growing fast. Congratulations, it will be a boy."

Jochann pumped the doctor's hand, tears of gratitude in his eyes.

"I can never thank you too much, doctor. When may I see my wife?"

"Now."

"When may I see my son?"

"In nine months."

"You have made me a very happy man."

"There is one danger, however."

"*Danger!*" God almost swooned at the word and held tight to his chair for support. "What do you mean?" he cried.

"There is nothing that cannot be avoided if you take the proper precautions. Your wife is from a planet with a very rarefied atmosphere, and her strain has been adjusted to this through many generations. She has no difficulty accommodating to a denser atmosphere, but there is some danger to the offspring during pregnancy. You must take precautions. Can she return to her home world until the child is born?"

"Impossible! Her world is now my world."

"Are you a rich man?"

"Incredibly so. Does it make a difference?"

"It does. You must find a mountain on your planet where the air pressure is her norm and build her a small villa there where she can pass the coming months."

"I will build her a castle, gardens, a world of beauty, with a thousand servants and a private hospital."

"A small villa will do fine, but I imagine she will not object to

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your arrangements. Here is your bill and you may see your wife as soon as you pay it."

He wrote the outsize check in a golden haze of happiness, and they embraced in a climax of shared joy. Hand in hand they returned, summoned the servants, and set off at once for the mountains.

It was a picnic of pleasure. When the heavily laden procession came to a town, the inhabitants all joined it to share the burdens a part of the way. They rolled over the foothills and up the flank of the Great Divide. When Jochann's golden barometer pinged, he struck his staff into the ground and shouted, "This is the place."

In the mountain meadow there, looking out over a green valley with the ice-topped mountains as a backdrop, the palace was constructed. They camped in a silken pavilion while the people labored with pleasure. Swiftly the building rose and was surrounded by gardens and fountains and music, and a great celebration was held when it was done.

"My darling, I must return to the palace to work," he told her in the privacy of their bed that night.

"I shall miss you, truly. Will you return soon?"

"As quickly as I can. But when there is only one true God, He cannot rest."

"I know. I shall be waiting."

The nine months passed quickly and Jochann had horse stations established along the route so that he could travel post-haste between the two palaces. He had planned to be there for the delivery, but he was detained on business, and his son surprised him by an early arrival. The first inkling he had of the unexpected, though still blessed, event was when a breathless and dusty messenger staggered into the throne room and sprawled before him holding up, with his last bit of strength, the forked stick with the message. Jochann read it and the universe reeled.

Come, it said, *at once. Your wife has given birth and both are fine but something of interest has happened.*

What chilled his blood was the apparent haste with which the note had been written and dispatched, and the fact that something else had been written in place *of interest* and then scratched out. When he held it to the light, he saw that the word was *strange.*

He killed three horses during that historical ride, and almost killed himself when an expiring mount collapsed at the edge of a cliff. But make it he did and burst open the door of the completely equipped and staffed hospital and seized the doctor by his coat and lifted him wriggling into the air.

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"What has happened?" he shouted, hoarse-voiced and filthy, red-eyed with fatigue."

"Nothing, they are both fine," and would say no more until released.

"Your wife is fine, your son is fine. She wants to talk to you now and the nurse will help you clean up before you enter her room."

Chagrined, he submitted to the ministrations of the off-planet nurse hired for this occasion, then tiptoed into Osie's room. They kissed and she smiled and patted the bed beside her.

"It has all been wonderful. Your son is blue-eyed and blond-haired, like his father, with a great voice and force of will. He is without infirmities and perfect in every way."

"I must see him!"

"The nurse is bringing him now. But first I must ask you something."

"Anything."

"During my studies I read about theology and understood that man had made God in his own image."

"It is usually quoted the other way around, but that is true."

"Therefore, if people believe strongly enough and hard enough that there is a God, there will be a God."

"It could be argued that way. Could we have this discussion later since I admit to being distracted somewhat?"

"Sf has not been looked at so significantly since Kingsley Amis's *New Maps of Hell.*"
—Samuel R. Delany

Lois and Stephen Rose probe the crisis of our time by examining science fiction's approaches to it. Among the sf writers they evaluate are Asimov, Clarke, Heinlein, Sturgeon, Wells, Lewis, Ballard, and Zelazny.

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"I am finished. And here is your son."

The baby was perfect, as they had said. Already smiling and clenching small fists.

They had not told him that there was something else.

Floating, just four centimeters above his head, and moving when he moved, was a shining silver loop of light. ◄

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BOOKS

RARELY HAS SO LITTLE HAPpened so delightfully as in MASQUE WORLD (Ace Books), the third of Alexei Panshin's novels about Anthony Villiers. Much of what passes for humor in science fiction runs on the same action-at-any-price formula that powers the cheap melodrama inflicted on us in the name of adventure; the only difference is that in place of the characters facing another meaningless menace every thousand words, they face another meaningless custard pie.

MASQUE WORLD is constructed on different principles altogether, by a man who realizes that a comic novel is something more than a comic book without pictures. The story line is almost invisible: Lord Semichastny of Delbaso plans a costume ball, and for a while it seems as if it might be a failure; Villiers experiences a small delay in receiving a letter; various characters become involved in the celebrations of the Xochiti Sodality, a fraternal organization of middle-aged men; Lord Semichastny's party is a success after all. Panshin stops the story entirely now and then to deliver brief philosophical essays. The closest thing to an action-packed climax in the whole narrative occurs on page 149, when Torve the Trog kicks Sir Henry Oliphaunt in the leg.

In the void left by the absence of the usual hullabaloo, Panshin has placed wit, ingenuity, intelligent observation, and good writing. An example:

> "I'm a pragmaticist," he would say, meaning that he had no education and was selective about his principles."

Another example:

> As a self-protective device, all his senses were filtered so that he shouldn't be swamped by more data than he could safely handle. His hearing was miserable. . . . For him to hear music, it had to be loud enough to annoy. He would turn it on for a time, let it irritate him and his neighbors, and then turn it off again convinced that it must have some purgative value, since he could detect none other. He had a regular time marked on his schedule.

The subject of this last quotation is an inept bureaucrat. This is a conventional figure in humorous science fiction, but please note that the treatment is unconventional. Panshin is interested in

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the insides of his character, the fears and drives that make him such a nebbish. This gives him a field for comedy denied an author for whom The Inept Bureaucrat is a standard ingredient, with as little interior structure as a potato, to be taken off the shelf whenever needed to fill out the plot.

Oh, yes. One last point: MASQUE WORLD is not just better than the competition; it is, by any standards, a very funny book, and a joy to read.

Robert Silverberg has had two careers. This would be no oddity for a writer, were it not that both of them are writing careers. Silverberg began writing science fiction in the mid-fifties and soon established a reputation as The Compleat Hack. With astonishing facility, he would churn out science fiction, children's books, dirty books, whatever was ordered. (During this period, he was observed at a Milford Science-Fiction Writer's Conference complaining that he was suffering from a severe case of writer's block—he had not written a word for a whole week.) The peak of the old Silverberg's career was reached when, with the aid of Randall Garrett, he sold to John Campbell of *Astounding* an endless skein of stories that managed, with admirable accuracy, to push every one of Campbell's many buttons, and also managed, with admirable economy, to have no other detectable qualities whatsoever.

A few years ago, Silverberg announced that the old Silverberg was dead. He had invested his income wisely, and now he would never have to think of markets again; he could devote himself to serious writing. To almost universal astonishment, he did just that. Beginning with THORNS, the new Silverberg has produced eight novels, some very good, some not so good, but all clearly the product of a genuine individuality, as different as could be from the old bland hackwork.

TO LIVE AGAIN (Doubleday) is Silverberg's latest novel. It is set in a world in which it is possible to record a man's personality, the total content of his nervous system, and to implant this record, after his death, into another human mind, where it becomes a kind of secondary personality, a persona. The donor gains a form of immortality; the recipient gains the knowledge and insight of the persona. The complicated and ingenious plot centers on the struggles of two capitalists, Mark Kaufmann and John Roditis, to obtain the formidable persona of Paul Kaufmann, Mark's uncle.

In another sense, though, TO LIVE AGAIN is about the corrupting effects of power. All of the major characters in the book are monsters, desiring only power, not for any purpose, but for its own

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sweet sake. Their wealth is of value to them only as a badge of power. Immortality is desirable only because it offers an opportunity to extend power (they all plan, upon reincarnation, to become dybbuks—to oust their host personalities and gain true immortality). The sexual act is to them one of the highest forms of human pleasure only because it offers an unparalleled occasion for humiliation and manipulation of another person.

This last, by the way, is characteristic of the new Silverberg. Just as, in the fifties, Theodore Sturgeon wrote a long series of stories that were all concerned in some way with the uses of love, so has Silverberg written a series of stories all concerned in some way with the misuses of sex. Indeed, collectively, the works of the new Silverberg represent the most disgusted view of human sexuality around since the passing of the late bishop of Hippo.

It is a mark of Silverberg's skill that this monstrousness is never stated explicitly. At the close of TO LIVE AGAIN, his characters are in various postures of triumph or defeat, but they are all convinced they have lived life to the fullest, and have striven after that which is worth the striving. Only the reader is left in horrified fascination, as if he had just witnessed feeding time at the cannibal cage.

One complaint: Like a persona trying to go dybbuk, the old Silverberg sometimes rises to the surface screaming cliches while the new Silverberg's attention is wandering. Thus, TO LIVE AGAIN is spotted with limp phrases like, "She slipped the little card into the deep valley between her breasts." Not *that* valley again! These same breasts (those of Elena Volterra, Mark Kaufmann's mistress), are elsewhere described as: (1) high, bulky, (2) pounds of flesh, (3) heavy (and "artfully cantilevered by a wisp of sprayon support"), (4) ripe, lush, mounds, (5) majestic, (6) heaving ("the dark-hued nipples erect"), (7) a soft mound (left one only, this time), (8) massive, (9) meaty mounds, (10) heavy mounds, (11) huge globes, and (12) a soft hill (one only, again). Now, no one expects a hard-working science-fiction writer to devote hours to perfecting the art of mammary description, but surely even a plain undescribed breast is better than this numbing collection of bromides.

There are many people who like the sort of stuff Keith Laumer writes; they think he writes it very well, better than almost anyone. If you are one of these, the only purpose of this review is to tell you that Putnam has published Laumer's THE LONG TWILIGHT. However, if you do not

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know the sort of stuff Keith Laumer writes, the following may help.

The main action of THE LONG TWILIGHT is set in the near future and takes place in less than a day. Interspersed with this, though, are flashbacks telling the background of the main story. These are spread over a thousand years. Only at the climax of the novel is the final piece of the background revealed. This construction is to build suspense; it keeps the reader in ignorance not only of how the story is going to end, but also of how it began.

The near-future story begins with a man named Grayle in a prison in Florida. It turns out that he has been handed down from one prison to another since the Civil War. This is peculiar, since Grayle does not seem very old, but nobody in the story knows how long Grayle has been in prison, because his records have been lost. Not even the warden of the prison knows why or when Grayle was sent to jail. This does not disturb him. In fact, he is planning to arrange for Grayle's release in a short time, because he sees that Grayle is a nice man.

Now, you may think this warden is some kind of lunatic, but that is only because you do not understand the sort of stuff Keith Laumer writes. The real reason Grayle is in prison is so he can escape from prison, overpowering two armed guards and breaking steel bars with his bare hands. Also, having escaped from prison, he can have many hairsbreadth escapes from stupid and vicious cops, in the course of which he can pick up a girl sidekick whose unquestioning faith and undying loyalty he can win in ten minutes of laconic conversation. Also, after saving the world, he can be gunned down by one of the stupid and vicious cops, and can die nobly, saying, "Even the longest night . . . ends at dawn."

The background story is pretty much like the near-future story, with lots of heroism and nobility and loyalty and bloodshed. The final revelation is that everyone's troubles are due to a cunning and vicious villain named Xix, who wants to destroy the world for no good reason. Now, you may think this Xix is some kind of lunatic. This time, you are right; Xix *is* a lunatic. He is also a computer. Mad mechanical earth-destroying villains are the sort of stuff that is liked by the people who like the sort of stuff Keith Laumer writes.

The title, THE LONG TWILIGHT, does not seem to have much connection with the story. I like to think that it refers to the present age in science fiction, when there are many people who like the sort of stuff Keith Laumer writes, and think he writes it very well.

—SIDNEY COLEMAN

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The author of this story is a college professor and sometime fiction writer—"science fiction mostly now, but I've appeared in magazines as diverse as Womans Day *and* Country Gentlemen. *Chronologically, put me somewhere between Glenn Campbell and Bing Crosby." Mr. Tall also mentions that one of his concerns is high country ecology, which shows up in this superior first appearance in our pages.*

THE ANGRY MOUNTAIN

by Stephen Tall

CRAG'S MOTHER HAD LEFT the cave. All day she had been gone, and her scent grew stale amid the many stronger reeks of the damp and filthy cavern. She came back at dusk.

She crept past him toward the cave mouth, her eyes red and furtive. The smell of fresh blood came from her. She clutched to her breast with both hairy arms something small that squirmed and whimpered. Its scent was strange.

Crag ran to her. Her lips drew back from her yellow teeth, and she pushed him away with a long, horny-knuckled hand. The thing she held mewed like a beast.

"Where did you get it?" he asked.

But she would not answer. She only held it close and looked at him with wild, warning eyes. She went into the cave, back to the place where she had for days piled the dry leaves deep. And there she lay with the thing that she had brought.

Crag's father sat on a rock before the cave. His red-rimmed eyes had watched as his hairy woman slunk past. But he did not move. Near him the torn and partially dismembered carcass of a small horse lay on the rocks. Flies swarmed over it. On a naked tree nearby, great vultures looked on hungrily.

Crag had eaten of the flesh while it was still warm and sweet. His father had gorged himself, tearing flesh from bone with his fang-like teeth, and devouring the entire heart. He was sated. He sat dully, digesting, his hairy shoulders bowed, both great, gnarled hands grasping the handle of his heavy axe. He beat the crudely chipped stone idly on the ground.

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"She has something," Crag said. "She will not let me see. Its smell is strange."

"It is the way of women," his father mumbled. "They find them in a secret place. They eat and make noise and grow and become men."

"But where is the secret place?"

"The women know."

Crag's small eyes were bright, and the brain behind them was alert and busy. He was active and curious. In his twelve life seasons he had learned all manner of things his father would never have noticed. He had learned, too, when to speak to his father and when to walk softly and to be ready to run. Not since he was small had he taken a blow from those long, callused hands.

Crag did not know it, but he was different. Even when he was hungry, he thought and puzzled about things that had nothing to do with food. He puzzled now about the thing his mother had brought. In a way he knew it was as his father had said. There had been others. Crag remembered other times, when he was smaller, that his mother had brought a thing back to the bed of leaves. It soon had died, and his mother carried it away. The last time he had followed her. From the rock that overhung the swiftest part of the stream, she had dropped it into the water. Then she had gone back to the cave, back to her furtive feeding when his father had eaten, back to the skulking life she led in the rocks around the cave mouth. And she was kind to him again and would suddenly put her long, hairy arms around him and squeeze until it hurt.

Crag thought of this. He went over to the carcass of the horse. The flies rose in clouds. With the sliver of volcanic glass with the sharp edge, he ripped out a portion of the blackening liver. His father watched him.

"She must eat," Crag said. "Perhaps the thing she has must also eat."

His father considered this heavily. He found it hard to grasp.

"We have eaten," he growled. "She could come to the flesh."

"If I take it to her," the cave boy said, "she will not have to move. She can lie on the leaves and eat. She does not wish to leave the thing. Perhaps she thinks you will harm it."

His father's bloodshot eyes were puzzled. He did not understand. But he was too full of flesh to be aroused.

"Take it," he said. It was only a grunt, but that was what it meant to Crag.

He carried the lump of dripping, still-fresh liver and placed it carefully just within her reach at the edge of her bed. He was cautious, for her lips drew back over her teeth, and he could see

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her body tense. He drew back, and she reached for the food. She bolted it in chunks, then licked the blood from her hairy hand. And all the while she held the thing against her breast.

"What is it?" the boy asked again.

She looked less fearful, but she only said:

"Go away!"

And Crag went away, to wonder about this thing. He hoped his father would not grow angry at it. He wouldn't, as long as there was flesh. When his father was hungry, he roared and struck with his hands. Only those who could run away were safe. And the thing could not run. Crag was sure of that.

There were other caves along the cliff, other sullen, beetle-browed old males like his father, other furtive, cowering females like his mother. He avoided them all. This was wise, as he well knew. Friendship was a thing he had never heard of. He had watched boys like himself and even approached them at times. But always they bared their teeth and backed away. And if they were small, their mothers flew at him with rage.

Crag went along the river, then up through the boulder field beyond where the cliff rose high. Crag spent much time among the rocks. The sun shone hot there. The rocks were comfortably warm. The cave boy loved warmth. The dark, damp cave protected from beasts, but he stayed in the light and heat when he could.

Many rodents lived among the rocks, marmots and conies and chipmunks, feeding on the abundantly flowering plants that grew in soil pockets and crevices. Crag watched them like a shadow, and took them with his bare hands. They made up much of his food. If his father slew a large beast, he ate of it, but he did not depend on these. He knew that only he himself was dependable in this matter of keeping his belly quiet.

The weeks passed, and Crag saw well the thing his mother had brought to the cave. It was a child. It could wave its arms and kick its legs and make small sounds. Never had Crag seen one so small. He was interested, but his mother did not let him come close. She was very careful of this tiny thing, and carried it in her arms wherever she went.

It was a time of much food. Perhaps that was why it lived and did not have to be dropped into the river as the others had. The small, browsing horses lived in bands where the forest met the grassland, and Crag's father and other old hunting males dropped among them from the trees and killed them with clubs and axes. Once, great wide-horned cattle

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had plunged over the cliff when the sabertooth stalked them, and then there had been meat for many days. Vultures and hyenas and shadow wolves had assembled to join the feasting. It was a time of danger as well as food.

To kill, to gorge, to avoid the sabertooth and the bear, to sleep in the reeking cave and wake to gorge again; this was the life of Crag's father. It was the life of his mother, too, except that she watched always the little child, and fed it and protected it, and allowed no one to come near it.

Only Crag looked about and was interested in the many things around him. His nose was keen, and he sniffed the smells on the moving breeze with pleasure. The crest above his small, sharp eyes grew heavier daily, for he was swiftly approaching the maturity of his short-lived kind. But he was different. He thought about things. And always he sought warmth.

"It is like the mountain."

Crag crouched at a distance, his club tightly gripped in a hand more powerful than he knew, and watched the spiraling smoke from the rotten, dry log. A lightning fire, relic of the storm that last night had sent him scurrying to the shelter of the home cave. Crag did not know this. But he did not feel the unthinking fear of fire that his people had always shared with the beasts. He studied it, alertly.

And in the distance, rearing above the cliff and the boulder fields and the forest lands, the great shattered cone of the mountain lay, wavering clouds and plumes of smoke trailing from its top. Crag only glanced at the mountain. It always smoked. This little smoke, so near, was new. It fascinated him.

He crept closer. When a light breeze blew, the smoke streamer thickened. He could see a red glow in the punky center of the log. A crisp dry leaf drifted down, landed by chance in the very center of the glow. Smoke rose, a bright blaze flared—and the leaf was gone. Only a shadowy curl remained, dark above the glowing punk.

Crag's little eyes glowed like the fire. His different brain raced. Stealthily he approached the log, another dead leaf in his long, simian fingers. He leaned over the log, and the warmth struck his hairy face. Carefully he dropped the leaf. The fire consumed it, warmth flared up with the blaze.

Crag shrank back, but he was pleased. His eyes told him that the fire could not leave the log, could not pursue him. It could only stay where it was—and eat leaves. He brought it more, feeding them one by one. The warmth was pleasant, so long as he did not get too close.

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When he put in a twig attached to a leaf, the fire ate the twig as well. So he brought more twigs, then branches. Soon he had a crackling blaze going, and it reached out, sent up clouds of smoke, and began to consume the log. Crag drew back in delicious fear. But when the fire had finished the branches, it subsided and grew small. The log, almost burned in two, glowed dully.

"It is like me," Crag thought. "It must eat, or it will not live."

He wondered dimly where the fire had come from. He had seen evidence of other fires, but it chanced that this was the first one he actually had seen alive. In the distance, towering high, the mountain sent up thicker smoke clouds. Perhaps, like the thing in the cave that was his mother's child—perhaps this was the mountain's child.

It was a provoking thought. He watched the mountain with increased interest. The top of its cone was far away, but he somehow knew that the flame in it was very big. What did it eat? Why did it not die? It would need more than leaves and twigs. Whole trees would be required to satisfy its appetite. Thus thought Crag, vaguely and dimly, but he did think. And of all his people, none had ever thought these things before.

Rain began, gently enough, but soon the skies were leaden, the clouds swept low, and the scattered drops became a downpour. Puffs of steam rose from the log. The glow died. Crag ran with dripping twigs, but it was no use. The burned spot lay black and sodden. The fire had been killed by a few minutes of dashing rain.

Crag hovered over it in distress. He looked up at the smoking orifice of the volcano. The dark streamers poured out as they always had. The rain had not harmed them. The water that fell only killed the mountain's children.

He went disconsolately back to the dank family cave, curled up in his leaf pile, slept and dreamed of the fire's warmth and of the cheerfulness of the flames as they licked up leaves from his finger tips.

After a long sleep, Crag left the cave early in the sunny morning. He carried his sliver of volcanic glass for cutting, and the thick club already worn smooth by his hand. His heavy shoulders seemed to have grown in the night; his small eyes were sharp under their lowering crests. He still lacked the bulky power of his sullen father, but he was a formidable hunting beast for all that. And the alert intelligence of his quick eyes proclaimed him something more. He was a man, not just a beast. He was a thinking man, a man changing.

The object of his search

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confirmed these things. He did not hunt for food, although he was hungry. A thought had fixed itself in his restless brain. The rain had killed the mountain's child. He would go up the mountain, and there he would find others. Perhaps he would see what the mountain ate, how it kept itself alive, why its smokes were never quenched by the rains. These thoughts were not clear in the cave boy's mind. Perhaps they were more feelings than thoughts. But the need to know pulled him, and he crossed the boulder field with his senses alert, his eyes fixed on the smoking cone beyond.

His nose was busy, too, with nearer concerns. It twitched with the good mouth-watering smells of marmot and chipmunk and grouse among the rocks. His belly clamored. He abandoned his main objective to fill it, for he knew that the mountain would not run away. A stealthy stalk, a pounce, and a large fat rockchuck died in his hairy hands. It was heavy and meaty. Crag tore off its pelt in furry strips and ate the entire warm, dripping body. He split the leg bones for their marrow, and finally, with a stone, he cracked the skull like a nut and sucked out the brain within.

With a meal inside him Crag could travel. He did not hurry, and he kept all his senses alert as he moved higher and farther from his home range than he had ever been before. The dangers from wolf and hyena were less as he climbed, but he still crossed the spoor of the sabertooth. He was not concerned. These things were a part of his life. Vaguely he knew that sooner or later all things died. So would he. Instinctively, he meant to postpone it as long as possible.

Even the mountain's children died. It was to learn more of this that he was making his way up toward the mountain's top, where the smoke had always poured out. For the mountain, it seemed, did not die.

The sun, hot and pleasant, passed overhead and began to drop. Crag reveled in its heat. He had never been too warm. In the last small tongue of dwarfed timber reaching upward toward the peak, he found a shallow pool of cool water, and he drank until his belly sagged. He did not associate this thirst with the height, or with the heat of the sun. Drinking, like eating, was something he did automatically, as other animals did.

The higher slopes and reaches of the mountain were unlike anything Crag had ever seen before. He crossed dark stretches of bare, ropy lava, black basalt frozen as though it still flowed. Patches of slag and cinders gouged even his horny feet. He learned to avoid them, keeping to the bare windswept rock. And ever closer above

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him the smoke cloud spiraled and ballooned into the hot sky. Sometimes the very rocks seemed to shudder when the puffs were greatest. And Crag could hear, ever more distinctly, deep rumblings, massive thumpings, as if a great beast were in the mountain.

But Crag did not think of beasts. To him the mountain was alive, and living things made sounds. He expected them. The mountain's child had not pursued him, so he felt no fear of the mountain. It was merely bigger.

He climbed the last ridge and crouched, thrilling and with small eyes agleam, looking down into the volcano's vast crater. He was astonished that the fire lay far below him. But in the mountain's throat a cauldron bubbled, a tossing sea of molten rock. It glowed fitfully, and flames ran and flickered over it.

On the slopes inside the crater nothing lived. Crag knew he could go no closer to the fires. Jets of smoke and steam poured from crevices. The heat from below was on his hairy face. For a long time he crouched and looked in wonder. As far as he could see, the mountain had no children here to which he could feed twigs and leaves. And the mountain itself ate the solid rock.

The sun was gone before the cave boy again reached the lower slopes and the trees. Dark clouds were forming and dropping lower. Those above the mountain showed warm and pink from the fiery pit into which only he, Crag, of all his people had ever looked. Or had ever thought of looking.

When it was night and the beasts were prowling, Crag made himself comfortable in a tree fork and did not dare the dangerous way back to the home cave. He slept fitfully, in snatches, and was awake and alert to each different sound and smell. He had learned his world well. That was why he was still alive.

There was no way that he could tell even his mother what he had done, what he had seen. In a vague way he longed to speak of what he thought. He had need for someone to wonder with him. But there was no one. He was too different. His people would not think as he did now for millennia yet. But this, too, of course he did not know.

So he prowled and hunted and feasted and grew. Like his father he killed large beasts and brought them home to the cave. He watched the small sister learn to sit and to crawl, and finally to scurry about the cave like a chipmunk. The mother guarded her closely still and stood between her and all danger. Crag would have been glad to be friendly with the little thing, but the mother always warned him away. There had been too many little dead ones to drop into the stream.

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Whenever he hunted, wherever his callused feet took him, Crag was always watching, always searching. He still hoped to find another of the mountain's children. He knew well the marks they left, the little dead piles of charcoal and of ashes. How they came from the mountain he did not know. He didn't associate them with the lightning. But one thing he did know, for he had seen it. It was the rain that killed them.

And deep in his brain, with its larger lobes, an idea took form and grew. The little fires, if he found them, would be pleasant. They would be warm. They ate only leaves and branches. If he could make one to live in the cave, where rain could not fall, it would not die as long as he brought it leaves and branches to eat. His eyes gleamed whenever he thought of these things, and they gleamed still more when he finally found the fire.

Like the other, it glowed and smoldered in the depths of a small punky log. It welcomed dry leaves from a hairy hand, and eagerly consumed dry twigs and larger branches. And when the log had burned through, there was a short length, one end aflame, that the cave boy could lift and carry. He bore it carefully, for he had learned how it could bite.

In the dank cave the fire smoked and glowed dully. It accepted leaves from the bed piles nearby, and soon the fetid smells of the cave were masked by the fragrant fumes of the burning. Crag's hairy body enjoyed the warmth. The flames lit the cave walls with a brightness they had never known before.

Crag brought twigs and branches from the edge of the nearby forest. He piled them high in a corner of the cavern, so that the fire would not be hungry. He practiced the feeding, and because he learned from what he did, he kept the fire where he wanted it. He found that when he fed it too much, it grew large and hot. When he gave it no food, it became small and began to die. It was a fascinating thing, and the hours passed while he experimented.

Smoke swirled in the upper levels of the cave, for there were places where the space vaulted upward higher than a sabertooth could leap, always before in deep shadow. There was a crevice where bats came in, and this the smoke used for an escape. Crag could hear the bats twittering unhappily, shifting and rustling about as his unplanned chimney operated.

Crag had fixed his fire at a distance from the cavern mouth, back against a wall now no longer dark. His mother returned stealthily, holding in her arms the little child. A deep snarl of terror broke

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from her as the new smells struck her broad nostrils, and her eyes first glimpsed the flicker of firelight on the dark stone of the wall.

She crouched, trembling, and held the child close.

"Do not fear," Crag told her. "It is friendly. It eats only sticks and leaves."

He did his best, but these were not ideas easy to make clear. His speech was monosyllabled, and he used few sounds. He was sure that she did not, that she could not understand.

"Death!" his mother growled. Her fear was the fear of the beasts, for she was not so very different.

Crag coaxed and soothed her. No male along the cliff wall would have made such an effort, or would have understood that it could be made. Crag was far more different even than he looked. So the hairy woman did not run away in panic, but she stayed far across the cave, squatting behind her leaf pile. The child in her arms watched the flames with bright eyes.

The cave had grown warm. When he wished to sleep Crag did not go to his leaf pile, but stretched himself on the drying floor before the flickering fire. Somehow he knew and respected the danger of having leaf piles near the flames. But sleeping on the hard stone was no hardship, and he was warmer than he had ever been in the cave. Often he woke and fed sticks to the fire. It seemed to him that the fire slept too, for it reduced itself to glowing coals, then covered itself over with white ash. When he gave it twigs it would wake again, and flame and crackle as it ate.

His father had not returned before the dark came, so Crag knew that his hunt had taken him far and that he was sleeping somewhere in a tree. Crag hoped that he would bring back much meat. Then he would be less angry at the presence of the fire.

The old male had been growing more sullen and bad-tempered for a long time. Crag spoke to him often, as he liked to do, but he kept distance between them. And since she had brought back the little child, the hairy woman had not let him approach her bed of leaves. She skulked, and ran, and never could he come close. So, even when he was filled with flesh, his red-rimmed eyes glittered dangerously. Anything might send him into a roaring rage. So Crag hoped and thought that he would fear the fire.

Morning came. Light crept into the cavern opening. The sun's rays glinted and grew bright in the valley, on the surface of the stream and along the cliff wall. But the morning was not good. Great clouds of smoke boiled from the volcano's broken cone. Deep

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rumblings shook the earth. As Crag climbed among the boulders near the cave mouth, gray powdery flakes of ash came sifting down, drifting as gently as the white snow he remembered from the winter past. The black smoke spread like clouds, and gradually it blotted out the sun. The day became gray and threatening.

Crag suddenly knew a little pulse of uneasiness.

"It is angry. The mountain is angry because I have its child in the cave. It does not know that I have fed it well."

He did not run away with the unthinking fear of the beasts. The mountain could not harm him from a distance. He knew what it was like. He had climbed that broken cone. He had looked down into the mountain's seething red throat.

"Perhaps it is angry about that, too. Perhaps it did not wish me to look. But it cannot leave its place. It must stay where it is and be angry."

Of all his race, of all his sullen, fearful, hairy relatives, only Crag could have had these thoughts. His brain was different, a whim of evolution, a random chance in a species not yet ready to contemplate cause and effect. Crag was a man—too soon.

The thunder from the mountain grew. Red flames spewed and lanced above the crater, breaking apart the billowing smoke clouds. From the lower lip of the broken cone a red and yellow river came flowing and tumbling down the bare slopes, over the ropy basalt and the slag fields Crag had climbed. It plunged into the forests below. With cracklings and rumblings and sharp explosions it ate the tall trees and the grass alike. Its heat blew along the cliff wall.

"The mountain can move," Crag whispered. "It is coming down to feed on the trees, and to search for its child."

Crag's father returned. He came through the rocks faster than Crag had known he could move, his red-rimmed eyes fearful as he continually looked back, although the tumbling river of lava was miles away. But he still carried his kill. Across one hairy shoulder sagged the beaten and partially eaten body of a forest pig. He flung it down before the cave entrance.

Crag had spent a day and a night with the fire in the cave. He was hungry, and the odor of the pig came tantalizingly through the smells of the distant fires. His father went into the cave. Crag darted down swiftly from the rocks, and with the volcanic glass he ripped off a large chunk from a hind quarter. He would have liked liver or heart or even the spongy lungs, but these his father ate. Further, there wasn't time. He heard his father's growl of fear, and the old

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male came backing out of the cave. Crag had given his fire fresh fuel before he left. It was blazing and crackling and throwing sparks in a lively display.

"Death!" his father chattered. His thin lips were drawn back over yellow and rotting fangs. He gripped his axe convulsively.

Crag tore pieces from the flesh in his hands and bolted them. He circled around the old Dawn man to the cave mouth.

"Not death," he said. "It eats only sticks and leaves."

But, like his mother, his father could not understand. Some of the sounds Crag made had meaning only to him. His people would not learn their like for long centuries yet.

He went into the cave. His mother crouched in her leaf pile, watching him closely as he heaped branches and small logs onto the already hot fire. Dimly it was in his mind that if the fire was large, perhaps his father would see that it did no harm. The small sister in his mother's arms twittered and reached her tiny hands to the bright tongues of flame.

Crag tossed the remains of his chunk of flesh to the hairy woman.

"Eat!" he said.

She had not eaten for long. She was famished. She had fed the child, and her own body needed replenishment. So she seized the flesh with both hands and tore at it hungrily. For a brief time she was not alert—and that was enough. The little child darted from her shielding arm, scurried toward the fascinating fire. The child had not before been close. She had not felt the heat. She ran without fear straight into the pretty flames.

Crag was at the cave entrance. It was in his mind to call his father, to try to show him the warmth, the pleasantness of the fire; how it could not move about, how it ate only branches and leaves. His mother's shrill cry of anguish brought him about, crouched and ready, club in hand. She, who had never approached the fire, rushed at it frantically. She did not feel the searing pain of her burned hands. She cradled the tiny smoking body. It was a hot fire, and it had been a very small child. Probably she had died with the first flame drawn into the little lungs. She had not made a sound.

"Death!" the woman screamed. And "Death! Death! Death!" she cried on and on, her blood-shot, agonized eyes accusing her big son.

And Crag panicked. His better brain told him what had happened, and he knew that forever the woman would hate and fear him. He ran, and his mother's wailing cry followed him:

"Death!"

He ran past his father, who

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still stood, fear of the flaming river from the mountain and the blazing fire in his own cave more than his slow brain could grapple with. The woman's frantic keening was the breaking point. The old male went berserk.

"Death!" he howled, and hurled his axe after his fleeing son. Then he followed it, the paroxysm of fury blotting out the confusion he could not resolve. "Death! Death! Death!"

Crag was not lucky. The thrown axe would have missed him, but it struck a boulder and glanced, whirling. The heavy stone smashed deeply into his hairy thigh. The bone shattered, and Crag went down.

There was no pain. Crag struggled up, went leaping into the rocks on his good leg, dragging the dead and broken member that no longer obeyed him. His blood splashed the boulders as his life ran out through the ragged wound. Below him his father retrieved the newly reddened axe and came on, screeching, roaring. "Death! Death! Death!" It was a maddened, mindless chant.

But Crag's doom lay among the boulders where all his life he had loved to enjoy the sun. He dragged himself upward and over a great stone. Then he fell heavily. His body rolled onto a startled, crouching, strange old male who had been making his way fearfully back to his own cave, fleeing the smoke and flame of the angry mountain. The boy tried to spring away. His dead leg crumpled, and the axe of the frightened newcomer scattered his better brain over the rocks around. The strange male fled on, and Crag's father, his rage suddenly gone, came up to stare stupidly at the death he had caused to be.

Thus, even in that far, far Dawn, those who were to be men feared and suspected and destroyed the thinkers of their race. It was a fear that would never entirely die.

In a brief time the mountain quieted. The clouds of smoke and the flames dropped back into the crater. The forest smoldered, but the warm sun shone in an unsullied sky. The great vultures dropped down eagerly to what lay among the boulders.

And in the deserted cave, with no one to give it food, slowly the fire died.

The 21st Annual MIDWESTCON *will be held June 26-28, 1970, at the Carrousel Inn, 8001 Reading Road, Cincinnati, Ohio. For reservation blanks and further information contact Lou Tabakow, 3953 St. Johns Terrace, Cincinnati, Ohio 45236. The MidWestCon (known as the RelaxaCon) is noted for its informal and relaxed tone. There is no program other than the traditional banquet on Saturday night. The Carrousel, given a five star rating by the Mobil Travel Guide, has two swimming pools, sauna, tennis courts, etc.*

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Bruce McAllister is presently a participant in the writing program at The University of California at Irvine, from which he writes that he is working on a 100,000 word novel based on themes in "Mother of Pearl" and "The Warmest Memory" (which will be published here shortly). The story below—as have been all of Mr. McAllister's contributions to F&SF—is an exceptionally inventive one, both in concept and treatment; it demands more than usual attention and offers more than usual rewards.

Mother of Pearl

by Bruce McAllister

YOU ARE I.

It is good to speak mind to mind now, without clumsy lips, or throats fated to lie. Good to know that your pendent breasts feel the same glories as mine, that your wings through the winds sing my path too.

No differences remain to make us seek each other by curiosity's pulse. No needs for each other to fill nor gold to be wrought from loving. You are yin and yang both, animus and anima, and Kronos and Rhea—as I am. We are wholes in the Whole, sense with soul, with body of spirit. There can be no each other.

We don't need each other—and still we speak? We want—you suppose—to try everything now, now that everything is easy, frustrations no longer weaving us. Speech is unimportant, so now we speak; we require it not, and so we enjoy. We shall love the other acts of feeling and deed, since they too shall be unneeded, unpressing, free faint breezes in our unimportant lives. Joy will come easy.

And so perhaps I do love you, and you me, since love is unneeded now.

You are I, and though you won't know it until I tell you, your story is mine.

I was an only child. We all were, by population's demand. My parents gave their time to me alone, and in turn the machines cared for them. (You remember a day:) I was sitting in my child's

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corner of plastiflesh comfort. In our home of a single rambling room. In a building of five hundred homes. I was watching the humanized pigs, dogs, cats and cows who lived in cartoons on the screens of my corner's wall. (Your world was fantasy, created by the machines, and by your parents, by their good intentions—even in matters of the world outside.)

I was watching one plump pig transform himself into a slice of bacon—to be gobbled up inevitably by a nearby wolf with false teeth. My naked mother approached and whispered a greater fantasy into my ear. She whispered and her rhetoric rang alien: whispers and perverted speech were fads that week—the fads changing every week to keep people busy, happy or unthinking. This was not the first time she had offered the lie (but you remember this day because you felt especially proud of the lie this time).

"We live, Petri mine, in the Twin Century Plan. This world is dream made realful—the long longing of man to be joyful once and forever. To insure this our happiness, the Plan began—before birth of great-grand-pop—with productions of million million machines. So now there be motile machines for labor physical, food-growth, medi-aids, manufactures, euthanasiacs; and sessile machines for computating, analoguing, metaphoring, population-controlling, consumption-orders. The machines live and eat all the thinking and doing. Men don't gotta burden their Selfs with thoughts and putter. Thinking be unrealful. We don't gotta pound our Selfs in frustration-specialties. Machines be willing to live as the specialists, and machines don't eat frustrations, don't go crazy."

And I looked back to the wall, to see the wolf's false teeth fall out and become a dogwood blossom (and you were happy).

(But when you were old enough to know that dreams are vulnerable in their simplicity, and reality is their natural predator, you were handed the oblique truth—by your father and others born before you.) It was my fourteenth birthday. When it was over I wondered why they had picked my B-day to weigh me up with heavy revelations. (But now you see: there is no finer gift, nor better justification for pain, than the Truth.)

"Even after the Plan began," my father said at my B-day table. The table was lit with blinking lights: Rhythmic Light was the fad that week. "Even after the full cities began throbbing with machine organs, sparkling with millions of mecha-specialists—which allowed men freedom from the minute of their birth-breaths to the instant of their formal sui-

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cides at age 100—men weren't happy—couldn't be."

"Men still dreamed, still do, of flying," said my grandfather, his face a fake, a piece of plastiflesh crafted by machines, "and of regaining the womb, of going home again, making love to their mothers, murdering their fathers, sending children into virgin frontiers."

"The machines do their best, yes, they do," my great-grandpop said, two days away from the suicide-chamber, but seated now calmly beside me. "The machines show all the love they can. Through mecha-hypnosis they let us imagine we've raped our moms, killed our dads, sired a hundred chillens—done anything we want and really believed it. Our dreams come true. But still . . ."

("But still man is unhappy," sprang the conclusion from your own head, when your birthday was over, and you lay in the fake-flesh embrace of your corner. "The Truth has been missed. Man wants to make love to his mother, kill his father, but he wants to feel guilty about those acts too. He wants to fly, to have a thousand sons forever, to quest for golden fleeces—but only with the knowledge that he really can't fly, have, or find. To dream, but not to reach the dreams. Dreams are no longer dreams when they're made real. Man was made for misery—to crave beyond his possessions.")

So it happened: I was floating in the redbath with Ellisa, my mate selected by machines and love. In our city home of another single, rambling room. Where for five years we had lived and loved, hoped with dreams—though that was immoral—and been loved in turn by the perpetual nannies, the machines.

I was swimming, had been swimming with naked Ellisa in the red gelatin of the morning bath for over a pleasant hour. We had made love til exhausted in the great tank—inhaling the special red colloid, panting its pulmonary candies and medicinal properties. Our bodies were cleansed inside and out with each intercourse.

Ready to end the bath, I moved to the submerged control-panel. I punched the food-key and assumed that this would be a familiarly ordered morning, that the gastrobot in the wall of the kitchen-corner would begin preparation of our breakfast.

A blue response-light should have lit up, turning the red gelatin around it purple—to acknowledge my signal. But it remained dead.

I punched the key again. Then I smashed at it. Again, again. Tightenings grew in my chest, unfamiliar risings. No machine had ever failed me before—failed anyone ever! There was no such thing as error—but suddenly I knew Error was being born.

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Unfamiliar tensions, frustrations rose, brought nausea. I flailed toward Ellisa, grabbed her, gestured in spasms at the silent response-light. Her eyebrows lifted, her features contorted from a smooth moon to the face of a pig-turned-to-bacon I had known when younger. She began shaking. Together we scrambled from the redbath, blew the colloid from our lungs with the Transmasks, and stumbled into the kitchen-corner.

"Error, error, error!" Ellisa managed to say. Her knees tried to fail.

I was silent, heart kicking. I punched commands on the master-panel.

Nude, still dripping red, I screamed at the panel:

"Arr! Arrrr!" The word wouldn't come out. But then, "Arror! Error! Response-light is Error!"

The panel said nothing, showed nothing.

"Crux!" shouted Ellisa, holding my shoulder in her collapse. "Crux will know, will fix!"

I punched the code for the city's omni-ganglion of computers, run by computers.

Crux said, showed nothing.

Ellisa moaned, slipped to the soft floor. She writhed in quiet hysterics, sliding on the gelatin still wetting her.

In that moment I wanted the security of love-making again. The ordered passions of love-doing! Safety from all threats, even those of the mind.

I fell to the floor like the animal I became, quickly, on top of Ellisa. Together we slipped and slid, quickly, mortar and pestle. We began to cry like the infants we had always been, and—

—and the door to our once-private home slid open with sucking sounds.

Ellisa craned over my shoulder at the door, whimpered, screamed. I turned, I saw, my throat caught. I moved but slipped to hit the floor with my chin, as four machines passed through the door and rushed at us.

I hadn't called for any rob-units! They'd come on their own! Error!

The four units—peacekeeper models, two of the heavy type, two hypermobile kinds—came and took Ellisa first. She struggled, screamed, vomited on the heavy unit that embraced her, and fainted with eyes open.

I jumped up, ran toward the warm bath-tank. I was insane, and I slipped, jumped up again, reached the tank's ladder. I was almost over the edge—

—when the second heavy unit reached me, grabbed my dangling legs, and tore me like a cloth from the bath's rim, held me in a tough plastic hug.

I screamed, urinated on myself.

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screamed again, lost my voice, and flailed.

I slipped a little, then a strong sting bit my arm. Anesthesiac needle. My body growled once, then my eyes stopped working.

But I heard many things after that.

(You heard them too . . . You are I . . .)

You dreamed you heard the robs taking you to sub-station Five of Crux, a great cement building resounding with nightmare mecha-symphonies . .

You dreamed you heard the machines fitting your body with slithering webs of surgical wires, chemistry, once-benevolent energies . . .

You dreamed you heard the doctorbots hum and pant as they stripped your soul of its body . . .

You dreamed you heard them drop you—your raw fleshless soul—into the corpus-animus of a bird, one bird among many fowl, among many domestic and zoo beasts—each animal hosting a raw human soul. Somewhere Elisa too . . .

Then you awoke to find your dream went on.

You were in the small bird-body. The world was growing dimmer for you. You were trapped in the bird's mind, separate but powerless. No arms, or legs, not even the bird's wings—no motion possible except for the gyrations of your imagination.

No, you did not really see yourself in the limited sense of "soul." You still possessed the conscious personality and temperament once labeled "Petri Stinson." But "soul" was the only term you knew to fit your present bodilessness in the mindless mind of the sparrow-size bird.

(At first I was able to look, smell, taste and touch through the bird's nerves, to interpret its surroundings according to my own human experiences: an aviary around me, the other sparrows, finches, mockingbirds, swifts and swallows—and beyond the aviary, the other cages housing rabbits, rats, cats and dogs—each animal containing, I knew, another trapped human *geist.*)

A week passed? A year passed? Units of time passed, and now the bird's eyes, olfactory nerves, and tympana had grown closed to your use. You were aware only of a milky world beyond, rarely discerning colors, rarely detecting muffled growls and warbles, and never at all having the odors and tastes from the bird's own feeding.

You were becoming a pearl.

Realization of that fact had come slowly, completing itself without shock.

Your soul, you saw, was a grain of sand in the bird-entity. Around that grain of sand, the fowl-soul was placing layer upon layer of a

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psychic nacre. For the bird this softened the annoyance of your alien presence. For you, it meant further chains in a world of your own memories, fantasies, with the lack of external stimuli, of any affirmation that existence was actual and not a fantasy itself.

But at least you had Ellisa, trapped beside you . . .

No, that was the biggest lie. You listened to her voice, but did not really believe. If you'd really believed her presence, you'd have been happy, which was far from your feelings.

But you listened.

"Why do you think we're being made into a pearl?" asked she—your wife and fellow child ever since Prime-Stratum Education together.

"I have my suspicions," you tried to believe. "What does one do with a pearl? You can mount it on a ring, or join it with others for a necklace. Whatever the display medium, a pearl is an ornament of certain emotional or barter value—to someone somewhere."

"But to machines?"

"Why not? We say that insanity needs emotions. And didn't the machines go insane, took our bodies away, and put our souls in the already occupied bodies of beasts?"

"It seems that way. But if so, then which machine out there—out of those millions of once-benevolent machines—will value, wear, display the pearl containing your soul?"

"*Our* souls."

"Your soul, Petri. You're alone. I'm not here."

She was cruel, and you cried. But soon you stopped weeping because you saw the truth. In your world now, crying could be no different than laughing, screaming, or silence.

Later—much later, a little later, no later at all—because you wished to hear it, to discuss it with her, Ellisa said to you: "It is crazy to believe that any machine would care to display or show off a human soul-pearl."

"The machines went crazy, didn't they?"

Just out of the range of your vision, Ellisa nodded.

"At first—a year ago? a century ago?" you went on, "I thought the machine's act against us was for our own good. Remember? Twenty years ago the machines advised men to give up our human forms, to adopt the bodies of birds—to satiate man's dream of flying, the worst hunger."

"But soon," Ellisa offered you, with a faddish voice like your mother's, "you mis-and dis-covered that this birdy-body was not for your use. The machines had plopped you in a beasty-body you couldn't operate for your Self. So

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then you knew . . . the machines had gone crazy!"

"There is other evidence too, you know," you said to Ellisa, yourself. "What about the other animals—cats, dogs, rabbits and rats in the other cages out there? Those bodies weren't suggested as ideal bodies by the machines. Those forms aren't ideal at all. And neither is a bird-body, even if I could control it. I'd want hands to work with, legs to run on, a lot of flesh to feel with. If I didn't have those, I'd be miserable no matter how much flying . . ."

"Perhaps," said Ellisa, sounding more and more like your own voice, "the machines made a sincere error? Perhaps they actually concluded that men would be happier in the bodies of beasts. Perhaps they didn't realize that the beast-minds would reject the presence of human souls, and encase them in psychic nacre."

"No," you sighed, and Ellisa mimicked your sigh like a bratty child. "The machines didn't make a miscalculation like that. They knew about souls, knew what was involved in transplanting them—or they never would have suggested bird-bodies to men twenty years ago. The machines did all the right research—since man hasn't been interested in research and sciences for a hundred years . . ."

You hadn't been one of them, but a random group of ten thousand men and women had been advised by the machines to enter an experiment, to forsake their human organisms for better forms. "We shall give you," the multi-media voice of intercontinental Omni-Crux had announced, "the bodies of birds, and you shall fly, and never suffer such dreams again."

The ten thousand voices of intercontinental man had shouted "No!" Even if the human body held man's basic nature, his proclivity for misery, still "No!"

The son you never had—since the planned time had not yet arrived when you were back in the city with Ellisa—was suddenly born and grew up quickly in the home of your mind. His presence made Ellisa, the necessary mother, more real for you. Now there were three together.

One "day" your son said to you, with abrupt maturity, "Perhaps man's continuous no's to the machines' well-intended suggestions brought a total malfunction of the Omni-Crux complex. Perhaps one massive comp suffered a circuit insanity—its Priority Program somehow inverting from Love/Make-Man-Happy to Hate/Destroy. Perhaps that single psycho-circuited computer transfused its dark priority into the entire complex. Perhaps . . ."

"I don't see how, I don't see

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how. But the question is," you asked rhetorically, hoping to impress your premature son, "how does one calculate the extent of a machine's insanity? With logic? That's absurd. What emotion should be projected to apply to the machine's crazy goal—if there is one?"

"All I know," answered Mother Ellisa, "is that *you,* Petri mine, project hatred. And sadism. Only sadism can account for the pearls being made of men's souls."

Your son knew, as Ellisa knew, as you knew, that the machine's love had always been the prime meaning in mankind's life. Your son knew, because he was your mirror-echo, that you yourself could only think of the machines as "loving." For thirty-five years the machines had loved you so well.

So now, for you, the machines were hating.

Now Ellisa said, with the wisdom of the greatest Mother, "Perhaps this is man's destiny, perhaps man's role in nature is finished. Perhaps the machines are as much a part of natural evolution as any animal has ever been. After all, my children, machines consist of nature's metals, nature's electricity, nature's nature—and they reproduce their kind. Are they not living in these senses?"

You talked with Ellisa and your son, Keth, for eternity. You discovered that in the eternal there is both infinite repetition and infinite variation.

Ellisa became a God who died every day and was reborn the next. You became your own son, falling from Ellisa's thighs, clinging to her breasts. You became Ellisa, and she became your daughter. She talked to you, and then there was only Ellisa, your child grown to womanhood. You were the imagined one, the figment of her fancy. The world was easier that way.

But soon and abruptly, you grew aware that your pearldom was complete.

The milky gray around was uniform, opaque and monotonous. Nothing entered, and though you screamed twice as a test, nil went out. And you saw that Ellisa was no longer with you, locked out forever.

"So now I shall be taken and displayed, or toyed with, or completely destroyed," you said to the only one you could.

Then you sensed motion. Was the bird being moved, and you with it? That was logical. Was "logical" logical?

The sense of motion persisted for what seemed to be an hour. Were the other em-pearled souls moving also? Ellisa somewhere . . .

Was the moving-feeling il-

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lusory—from expectation in your own increasing madness?

But the feeling was changing now. The only feeling you had, so you believed it.

Now the feeling informed you that the bird-body was gone. Had the machines killed it? Or somehow removed you without killing it?

The feeling . . . There had been, after all, a major sensation before, when you were still in the bird-body. A pressure. The bird's mindless soul had exerted a pressure on you.

Now no pressure.

So you pressed out with all your thoughts and feelings. The pearl lining held you, gave not the slightest.

You stopped pressing. You weren't tired—not in a world where fatigue was the same as crying, laughing, and silence—but you stopped because again came an outside pressure.

Something was happening. For once something was happening!

The soul that was you burst through the last pearl stratum, spun in confusion for a moment, reached out with tendrils of control, and discovered—

You understood. The hundreds of "perhaps" that had plagued your previous world dissolved. The lone remaining "perhaps" was the Hope of Pandora's Box. You recognized it as such.

You saw that the machines had not gone crazy—that their love of you had not waned. What do you do with a child who won't take advice for his own good? You force the child to take it.

Man had been unwilling to relinquish his human form—even for his own good. He had stamped his pampered feet in pubescent tantrums, and shouted constant no's at the maternal, paternal machines.

So the machines had gone ahead. The Priority Program was still to be Love/Make-Man-Content, but the enactment of the program's plan was to be kept a secret, until the transformation.

The machines had placed you and your fellows in animal bodies so that your souls would be made pearls. So that in turn you could be placed in brand-new bodies, ones that had never possessed souls of their own. Bodies molded by the talented machines.

The single "perhaps" in your mind was simple: "Maybe man will be different now."

For an instant you were embarrassed by the strange new flesh. But the embarrassment was just a flicker of flashback to the obsolete senses of your human body.

For an instant a new version of the oldest riddle, whose answer was "Man," rushed to your mind: "What walks on four legs in the morning, on two legs at noon, on three legs at night, and is given wings in rebirth?"

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Then you opened your eyes, flexed new muscles, shivered in pleasure when the wind touched you, and knew that you were an archetype made real of your race's dreams, from hungers that sprang from crying times long before Egypt.

You looked around you. You were crouched on a building roof. Around you seven machines stood quiet, watching your awakening, waiting to observe the conversion they had planned so well in clandestine circuits of steel souls.

You took to the air.

We are soaring now above the city—in the image of an animal that never existed (a beast extinct before it could ever live), in bodies dreamed by the human nights of a million years, in a dream made incarnate by the programmed love of machines who finally beat the narcissus of man's flesh.

We are sphinxes.

Our nostrils—flaring millionfold finer than symmetries of human nerves—find infinite perfumes in the simple city air.

Our lungs—conceived to inhale not only subtle scents but also nectar solids—take from the air all the nourishment demanded by our feathers, flesh and bones.

Our ears—tapered in familiar pink, disguising their talents—catch air songs of electrons pulsing, catch your body's own new heart, and lung-chants, and the doubling of cells and electric bloods coursing.

Our skins—from our naked woman's breasts to soft-furred arms to hind-legs taloned—measure time by split-second chills—in orgasms we shall feel forever in the winds that swallow us.

And our eyes—gem-lenses through which we know the myriad bonds of Tao—grow wide at the sight of another, a third, a hundred thousand other soaring sphinxes.

You see me now. My wings bend me toward you. In a cascade of zephyr, we circle one another.

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A single thought leaps to you now: "Are you out there, Ellisa? I need you. Can that be you out in front of me now?"

But the thought does not repeat itself, nor echo. Your last feeling of that kind has come and gone, the mood now alien, obsolete, its meaning no longer a coin of humanity.

Instead, as we circle, feelings of the androgynous weave you: "I am alone. I am happy. I am satisfied."

You'll ask no more riddles of yourself, you'll dream no more of butchered pasts, or still-born futures. We are no longer human.

I too am alone and content, as only hermaphrodites can be.

And you are I, as only telepaths can be.

You don't need me, nor I you. We shall never embrace on earth or through the air, never again need the match of mortar and pestle (to embrace when we are always touching?).

Still we shall bear children.

Born to us when we will, from your motherly fatherly thighs, and mine, they shall need no one, not even each other—for in turn their children will find birth soon after, taking instant flight from winged wombs in the lairs of infinite air, high above forgotten cities.

So you wonder about the machines. Their future without men. Their love was fuller in persistence than any love ever given by man to man, or woman to man, or man to child, was it not? You wonder about their future, and you taste the answer: you still remember those tales of sick dogs who left their masters to be alone, to face and swallow their deaths alone.

So we shall remember that once we shaped our tools, and then our tools shaped us.

But we shall never look down. Not now, nor in our children's times. We promise it.

And we shall keep our promise, as they kept theirs.

You are I, and we know us.

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In this latest Ben Jolson adventure, the Chameleon Corps agent is disguised as a folk singer who says things like: "Me and this guitar been through a lot of long and lonesome nights, a couple of leaves blowing anyplace." In between saying things like this, Jolson is on the lookout for a suitcase containing one million dollars, a simple mission complicated by giant lizards, railroad police and other improbable and very funny things.

HOBO JUNGLE

by Ron Goulart

INSIDE THE GUITAR WERE A blaster pistol, an interrogation kit and two chocolate bars. "Any emergency," said the Head of the Political Espionage Office, "any small emergency, and you reach into the back of your guitar."

Lt. Ben Jolson of the Chameleon Corps said, "I was wondering why it had such a strange tone." He took one of the chocolate bars and slapped the secret compartment shut.

"No," said Head Mickens, "the tone is authentic, Ben. We even had the computer over in the Folklore Bureau listen to the guitar."

Jolson, tall and lean, in subdued civilian clothes, said, "What did Tunky Nesper say?"

Head Mickens blinked and his forehead crinkled. "Who?"

"Nesper, the one I'm going to impersonate."

"Oh, we didn't think to ask him," said the Head. "He's a thousand miles from Keystone City anyway, way on the other side of Barnum in a rehabilitation center. I think we can safely trust our folklore computer."

Unwrapping the chocolate bar, Jolson said, "Okay, what's the exact assignment?"

"You have," said Head Mickens, "a certain hostility to computers, to machinery in general, Ben. I did slightly myself until I went to that robot analyst. He cured me of my hypochondria just like that." He patted the top of his

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desk, touching photos of lizards and stacks of railroad schedules.

"What are you taking pills for now then?" Jolson seated himself in a copper-colored chair and took a bite out of the candy bar.

Mickens' eyes widened slightly and the dark spots beneath them lowered toward his cheeks. "It's hay fever season. I really have that. Wait till you get to Murdstone. The pollen count on that planet is fantastic. 350 on a good day and anything over 10 is trouble."

"I don't have hay fever," said Jolson. "Murdstone? That's where the Political Espionage Office is sending me?"

"Yes," said Head Mickens. He stopped looking for his medicine and held up a photo of a brownish lizard man wearing a velvet suit, a flowered vest and with a large red stone stickpin in his full tie. He was posed next to a silver bicycle, his bowler hat held in one scaled hand. "Erdon Swaffle, the President of Lagunitas Territory on Murdstone. Lagunitas, as you probably know, is a somewhat backward area. The land car is just appearing there, air travel is unknown, and the economy is still heavily based on crops and cattle, though there is an expanding, but primitive, industrial system."

"Lizards run the place," said Jolson.

The Head found a punch card memo. "The population is roughly half lizard people and half human types. Fifty-fifty, though the giant lizards dominate and control." He located a spool of micromagazines, then noticed his hay fever capsules beneath it. "Excuse me a second. These are tough to swallow without water, aren't they? There. The government of Lagunitas Territory is democratic but, apparently, corrupt."

Jolson pointed at the microfilm. "I read those articles about the Lagunitas government that Tad Dibble did for *Muckrake*."

"Exactly what I was going to show you." Head Mickens let go of the spool. "Here's the problem. It seems there's a big suitcase buried someplace in Lagunitas with $1,000,000 in cash in it."

"Embezzled?"

"Yes," said Mickens. He sniffed, almost sneezed. "Dibble has learned that certain officials in President Swaffle's cabinet, especially the Secretary of Nutrition, have been siphoning funds for the past two years."

"Their funds or Barnum money?"

"Ours. Barnum's. Much of this hidden money appears to have been taken from the various welfare funds Barnum distributes on Murdstone."

"This wasn't in the articles."

"No, Dibble has been in contact with Political Espionage Office agents on Murdstone," said the Head. "Which is what ini-

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tiated, in part, your present assignment."

"Why is the million in a suitcase? Why didn't they spend it?"

"Oh, they spent two million," said Mickens, sneezing. "This is an additional million intended, apparently, for getaway money. Our Barnum government would like it back, but we can't openly ask for it. The government of Lagunitas is too shaky." He held up a picture of a plump green lizard in a tufted smoking jacket, who was sitting at a white marble table and enjoying a slim black cigar. "This is Linol Zee Bemsher, multimillionaire newspaper publisher and mineral heir. He lives on his own island and is pretty conservative. The Political Espionage Office has suspicions he might attempt a coup if Swaffle's administration teeters much more than it is now. He'd be worse."

Jolson crumpled the candy wrapper and tossed it in the floor dispozhole.

Mickens said, "Now, here's what you have to do. You become this fellow, Tunky Nesper, this drifting folk singer. He hasn't been on Murdstone in a couple of years, but they all know him. He comes and goes on all our planets and arouses no suspicion. He drifts from planet to planet, picking up songs, doing odd jobs. He probably needs therapy. That's his problem, though, not mine." The Head sniffed, sneezed. "Dibble, the reporter, is working on a story undercover. He's in a little rail town in the biggest agricultural valley in Lagunitas. You slip in as Tunky Nesper, find out from Dibble where the money is hidden."

"He knows?"

"Yes. You find out."

"Then steal it back."

"Right, and arrange to get the stuff out of Lagunitas Territory." Head Mickens felt some more of the things on his desk. "You won't have any trouble changing into this Tunky fellow?"

Jolson had the rare ability to change shape at will, to impersonate anyone, many things. He'd been processed by the Chameleon Corps, during a dozen long years at the Corps Academy. He'd gone in young, not quite in his teens. Then the Chameleon Corps had seemed to offer an adventurous life as well as a secure profession. That was twenty-one years ago. "No, no trouble," said Jolson.

"The guitar-playing may give you a little trouble."

"I already know how to play the guitar."

Head Mickens said, "So you do. I read so many dossiers in a day I forget whose attributes are whose. We do have some gadget they can implant in your brain and it gives you the ability to play the guitar. Or any musical instrument, for that matter."

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"What," said Jolson, "happened to the idea that I was semi-retired from the Chameleon Corps?"

"You are," said Head Mickens. "Now I realize we discussed the idea that you'd only have to carry out a minimum of assignments for PEO in any given year, Ben."

"Three," said Jolson. He was slouched slightly in the chair.

"Three, four," said the Head. "Verbal agreements don't have much influence on the Barnum government, Ben. After the next elections maybe. You know how the Chameleon Corps is set up. Because of the monumental amount of time and money involved in creating one single agent, CC can't ever allow one to quit completely."

Jolson said, "By the way, during my last assignment two hundred dollars worth of stuff in my ceramics warehouse got broken."

"There's a check being put through on that," said Mickens, massaging his cheek bones. "The payment has to come out of the Office of Public Works."

"Why?"

"I made the mistake of mentioning that some of your statuary was broken, and they mixed it up with a request for a new life-size statue of the Unknown Commando for the Keystone marina. Don't worry." Mickens sneezed. "I know you'd like to devote yourself full time to your ceramics business, Ben. Espionage has to take priority. The number of critical situations in the Barnum System is growing. I have a chart showing that, here somewhere. Jagged black line going up and up."

Jolson hunched, stroked the side of his neck a few times. "I believe it even without graphic proof. Where do I find this muckraking reporter Dibble?"

"Sleep-briefing has all the addresses and phone numbers and the rendezvous-point stuff," said the Head of PEO. "Wait now. There's another fellow I should mention. Older man, also a crusading journalist and a political cartoonist. He lives in Lagunitas Territory somewhere or other. Human type, big lump of a man with grey hair, wiry. Punches people in the nose a lot." He held up a news photo. "Henry Carlos Barby, prize-winning newsman and artistic journalist. He's supposed to be sympathetic to our Barnum government. PEO uses him as an information source. You might keep him in mind."

"Any passwords or countersigns to use with him?"

Mickens said, "He doesn't like that sort of thing. No code phrases and particularly no numerical identification phrases. He took a poke at our last man when he tried numbers on him. He doesn't even have an address number. A real individualist. You'll just have to look him up and say hello."

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Jolson stood and picked the weathered guitar off the Head's desk. "How long do I have on this assignment?"

"Depends on events, on what you encounter." Mickens blinked. "Still, could you have the money at the spaceport in Peralta Territory by a week from tomorrow?"

"That's the territory next to Lagunitas, isn't it?"

"Yes, the nearest spaceport. Barnum doesn't allow one nearer, since Lagunitas has a Backward Territory rating. Let us know when you'll have the money there. You think you can bring it off in a week?"

Jolson said, "We'll see." He opened the guitar and got the other chocolate bar out.

The lizard smiled, bit down on his cigar and resumed his piano playing. His left hand played heavy clumpy rhythm and his right a tinkling, skittering tune. On his bright green head his derby bounced and his tail flicked in time. "If I send for my baby," he sang in a sandy voice, "man, and she don't come. If I send for my baby and she don't come." He shifted his cigar, continued. "All the doctors in Zaragata Station sure won't help her none." He left off singing but the piano rumbled on.

Jolson was in a wooden chair at the table nearest the piano. He had one sinewy hand around a schooner of needled ginger beer. He was Tunky Nesper now, sharp featured and weather worn, wearing a much-washed work tunic and trousers. He looked to be in his middle forties, perhaps a few years more. His eyes were an intense blue, watchful but slightly tired. He had sandy red hair, thin and curly. "Don't quite scan," he said to the lizard man.

"Um, um," said the pianist. He was watching the keys, seemed to be looking for the end of the tune. "Zaragata Station is hard to fit into a lyric." He stopped playing, glanced at the glassless window in the small one-room wooden saloon. It was afternoon outside, bright hot.

There were three other customers in the place, human types, wearied dusty men in work clothes. The lizard used his tail to spin himself off his stool. "Anybody want a refill?" He was also the bartender.

The men, each at a different lopsided table, all shook their heads no.

The lizard stretched up and walked over to join Jolson. He pointed at the guitar. "You must be Tunky Nesper."

"Don't see no use denying it," said Jolson in a flat nasal voice. "Though sometimes I get to thinking I'm just a clump of dumler weed, blowed by the wind."

The lizard's cigar had gone out

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and he relit it with a wooden match. "Heard of you. I guess you've been every place."

"Every place twice," said Jolson. "And elsewhere, too. Rolling like a ball nobody throwed."

"Down around Woodville, in the hobo jungle, they sing a different version of that song I just did," said the lizard man, removing his derby and resting it in his lap. "You ever heard it?"

"I've heard lots of things," said Jolson. "I've heard things I wanted to hear and things I didn't. Heard men dying for no reason, and dark winds blowing people's houses away and money being made."

From another table a gritty man said, "You talk pretty poetic for a bum."

Jolson took his guitar from his back and made room for it atop the off-kilter table. "We're all of us bums, brother, hoboing through life. All of us. I remember once around Railcross Center I met a guy thought he wasn't. But he was."

"Lots of words," said the gritty man.

"This is Tunky Nesper," the lizard told him. "You must of heard about him. I wouldn't mess around."

The man had started to rise, sat again. "That's who he is? Yeah, I've heard. I've heard he knows how to fight like nobody else. Excuse me."

"Well," said Jolson, swinging the guitar to his back again, "I know how to fight and I know how not to fight. All depends."

The lizard man placed his derby on the table top and tilted it toward Jolson. Inside where the label should have been was a slip of bag paper with the numbers 13-15-24-1-18-15-2. "Where you heading from here, Tunky?"

"Where my feet take me," said Jolson. "Where the wind blows me to. Don't much matter. Who you are is more than where you are. I been thinking about just hoboing, hitting the jungles between Zaragata Station here and Woodville. Haven't been on Murdstone in two years and more, nor around the Zaragata Valley." In a much lower voice he added, "20-14-7-15-2."

Puffing on his cigar the lizard nodded. Outside on the dirt road, a horse-drawn wagon went by, piled high with dusty potatoes. "Railroad detectives been getting tougher with most of the jungles. About ten miles out of Zaragata Station there's a little stopover station called Thorneville, and back in the woods the hobos got a good place, still pretty safe."

The gritty man said, "I'd like to see somebody smash all this."

"Careful now," said the lizard. "Don't go talking against the railroads and the farm owners. Not out in the open when you don't know who you're with."

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The gritty man snorted. "Smash it every which way for all I care. I only worked ten days out of the last thirty. Keeps up, I'll have to hit the Welfare Store in Woodville. Or go live in one of the poverty camps in the woods."

"Watch out for those," said a blond-bearded man. "They're recruiting from those."

"Who is?"

"Anybody who needs hands free," said the bearded man. "Get you fined and then put you lining track or picking tomatoes to work it off. Or they send you down to Penny's Farm, the prison farm, and you're working for the territory for thirty days."

"Ought to smash it all,' said the gritty man.

The third man, plump and red-speckled, said, "You two guys get my dander. Guys like you. Look, I work every day I want to and I don't tell nobody to go to hell and I even paid taxes once. You guys and this so-called Hammitty bastard, they ought to put you all to work on Penny's Farm for good. Do some honest work and stop bitching."

"Smash you, too," the gritty man told him and threw his lopsided table. Its edge caught the plump man in the chin, and one of the leg tips poked hard into his stomach.

Jolson said to the piano player, "Will I find Dibble in the hobo camp near Thorneville station?"

"He's waiting there, calling himself Keystone Slim," said the lizard man. "Use your numerical sign and countersign stuff. Excuse me now. I have to stop this before the town militia or the railroad cops come in." He ran and grabbed the gritty man from behind.

Finishing his ginger beer, Jolson made his guitar more secure and dived out a side door. Dust was blowing south along the railroad tracks and he headed with the wind.

The leaves turned black as the day ended. The last of the sunlight snapped away and it was abruptly night. Jolson worked his way down through the tree-filled hillside, tangling with brush and vines and thorned wild flowers. A trace of cook smoke was coming on the warm wind, drifting up from below him. Insects began clicking and whirring, birds called and sang all around. Jolson's guitar made a whacking sound and stuck against the bole of an orangewood tree. He back-stepped to dislodge the instrument, and when he moved ahead again, a fist hit him low in the chest.

Another hand, not a mate to the fist, slapped tight over his mouth. Somehow his feet left the ground and he was moved downhill and through a gully and into a bowl-shaped clearing. When

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they put him on his feet and pushed him toward the single large campfire, Jolson said, "That's what I like about being on the road again. It makes life run over with mysteries and surprises."

There were some fifteen people scattered around the fire, five of them lizard men. There were two women with the group and no one who resembled Tad Dibble, the reporter Jolson wanted. He grinned his leathery, faintly sad Tunky Nesper grin and unfastened his guitar. Standing next to him was a slim girl in a grey work-singlet and grey trousers. He tossed the instrument to her and said, "Obliged if you'd watch this." He spun and faced the two hoboes who'd waylaid him. "I been hoboing now since I wasn't no bigger than spit. Seems to me you two are about the unfriendliest fellows I've seen in a while."

The bigger of the two had a wide-brim brown hat, no shirt, and checkered pants tucked into a pair of high lace-up boots. "We stop everybody. This ain't no welfare store, welcome one and all."

"That I know," said Jolson. He moved up to the man, then pivoted as his blue-coated companion slipped a knife out of his pocket. Jolson chopped the knife out of the man's callused hand. Reached for him.

"Hold on, hold on," said a lizard from the other side of the fire. "All that talk and that short temper. This fellow has got to be Tunky Nesper. I heard he was on Murdstone again."

The brown-hatted man asked, "You him?"

"Far as I know," said Jolson. "I'm Kid Brown and this is my partner, Raincoat Ziegler." He held out a big hand.

Jolson shook it. "Now I know your name, it makes me sort of sentimental. I'd feel bad now if I broke your arm."

"All my fingers are sprained," said Raincoat. "Otherwise I'd shake hands, too. We've all heard of you, Tunky."

"Yeah, I'm like the draft," said Jolson. "Lots of people have heard tell of me."

"We caught a tamis and we already had five pounds of potatoes fell off a wagon," said the lizard man who'd recognized Jolson. "We've got stew enough for everybody."

"I forgot," said Raincoat, whose major garment was a frayed knee-length coat with military buttons. He reached three tomatoes out of his coat pocket with his good hand. "I swiped these on the way here."

"In the pot, and then you two get back to standing guard," said the lizard. "Come on over, sit down, Tunky."

"I feel I will," said Jolson. "Seems like I been walking since I was half-growed." He sat on a

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log near the lizard man. "Things in Lagunitas Territory look worse. Everybody getting tougher?"

"Things always look worse," said the lizard. "I'm Woodville Shorty." They shook hands and he said, "President Swaffle and his cronies keep running things worse and worse, and there's been more riots in the big towns and the city. Makes everybody restless and low spirited. These kind of times lots of people like to crack heads. Jobs are tougher to find, too. And the railroad agents are making it harder to ride."

"Seems like every time a fellow tries to stand up for himself, two other fellows come along and want to knock him down."

The lizard man grunted up. "I have to look after the stew. We'll eat in about a quarter hour."

The girl with Jolson's guitar walked over and sat next to him. She had chestnut hair, long and hanging below her shoulders. She was hardly twenty, with a face just too thin. She was pretty still, but sad and tired. "Here's your prop," she said. Her voice was soft and careful.

"Thank you." Jolson took the instrument and dropped it to the moss at his side. "Me and this guitar been through a lot of long and lonesome nights, a couple of leaves blowing anyplace."

"You sure have that crap down," said the girl. "Must be a strain not to wince. You say them like you're embroidering each one. I had an aunt with crap like that all over her walls. She raised me, trying to use the maxims to get her over the hard parts."

"Well, now," said Jolson, "some folks talk a lot and some not at all. There's people who favor each style."

"You can relax with me. They all believe you're who you say. Dibble's not here any more."

Jolson said, "Oh, so?"

"Keystone Slim to you." The fire crackled up and her face flashed bright and clear for an instant. "15-14-22-20-24-22-11," she said.

It was one of the identifying phrases. Jolson gave the proper response, then asked, "And who the hell are you?"

"Sarah," she said. "That's enough name for now. Dibble found out something new, that someone may have moved what you're looking for. He took off three days ago, for the Pinero Woods."

Jolson swung his guitar up and rested it on his knee. "Are you with the Political Espionage Office?" he asked quietly, while tuning the guitar.

"No, I'm real," said Sarah. "I'm just drifting. I was born on Murdstone, not in this territory."

"How come you know what Tad Dibble was up to?" Jolson tried a few chords.

"I was sleeping with him."

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"Okay," said Jolson. "Three days he's been gone. Is that what he expected?"

"No," said Sarah, "he should have been here by yesterday. He planned to check out a lead in one of the poverty camps and then return in time to meet with you today."

"You know exactly where he went?"

"Yes, I can take you there," said the slim girl.

"Would it be safer to travel there at night?"

"Yes. After dinner things will settle down to cards and drinking. We can move out then."

"Won't you need to rest first?"

"No," said Sarah, "will you?"

A whistle sounded and oil lanterns blossomed in the woods above the gully.

"They got by the lookouts," shouted the lizard-man cook. He and the other hoboes kicked dirt on the fire.

"What?" Jolson jumped up.

"Railroad police," said the girl. She caught his hand. "Come this way." She pulled him away from the dying fire and straight across the camp site. "In between the white pines."

Jolson followed on the run. Back over his shoulder he saw lizard detectives coming down through the brush, derbys on their scaled heads. The yellow clubs in their fists were swishing through the cold black air.

The slim girl bent and stretched, scooped a palm full of water from the narrow stream. She drank, wiped her mouth with her wrist. "Downhill and out of the woods and we're there," she said.

Jolson squatted beside her. The night was thinning away and a chill dawn light was filling the forest. The trees were white and tall, close together and straight. "And Dibble didn't tell you what he thought had happened to the million?" He drank from the stream.

"No, I told you," said Sarah. "A man down there at the poverty camp has been giving Tad bits of information. He got word to Tad four days back that he'd learned someone had taken the money from where it was hidden." She sat back on her heels.

"But nobody knew where the stuff was hidden? Not this informant . . . what's his name anyway?"

"Mamlish. No, Tad had traced the embezzled money here to the Zaragata Valley from down in the capital, in Janela. Rumors of hidden money had been floating around for a couple of months. Only Tad and President Swaffle's gang knew."

"You say Dibble made sure the money was really gone?"

"Of course," said the girl. She stood, stretched. "They'd had the suitcase buried under an old out-

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building some thirty miles uphill from Zaragata Station. There used to be a gold-dredging operation based up there. The suitcase was gone when Tad checked. He'd left it there so nobody would get suspicious until you arrived. Didn't do much good."

"Now I'll try," said Jolson.

As Jolson stood up, Sarah moved her slender face to meet his. "You guys, you PEO mercenaries, come in from above. You do your dirty stuff and get out. You don't have to give a damn."

"You could be right," said Jolson. He turned away from her.

"I only work here," said Sarah at his back. "Isn't that how you feel? That's what they say at the Welfare Bureau and at the prison farms everywhere. You don't give a damn who dies or who gets the crap kicked out of him and how many kids never grow up."

Jolson faced her. "Look," he said. "I'm here to get a suitcase with a million dollars in it. What I feel about how things are here and what you feel about how things are, isn't important now."

"Sure," said Sarah. "Nobody even has to see your real face. Tad has to put himself on the line, and he can get hurt."

"Let's find him then," said Jolson. He left her and waded across the stream. The sun grew warmer and the last of the dawn mist disappeared.

Halfway down Sarah caught up with him. "Drifters, we're like kids," she said. "I can ask any questions I want to."

Jolson hunched his shoulders, got his guitar to rest easier. "It's like the wind blowing through the pines is how I see it. Wind can go most anyplace, blowing free like it does."

The girl frowned at him, then noticed the two thin teen-age boys off in the trees to their left. Sarah said, "We're friendly. Looking for Mamlish."

The boys nodded and Jolson and Sarah continued down toward the edge of the woods.

Mamlish shook dry tobacco out of a biscuit tin and onto a cigarette paper. He was a dull grey color, almost fat. "They're all bums and trash here," he said as he rolled a cigarette. "I'm the only one in this whole community has an indoor toilet."

"Noticed that right off," said Jolson. He had an elbow resting on the glassless window frame of Mamlish's shack. There were nearly two dozen shacks built in the small clearing. One-room patchworks of crate wood, split-rail ties, fresh lumber, flattened tin drums, squares of sacking, and rounds of bottle glass. "Some folks seem like they can carry civilization around with them."

"Now," said Sarah, "where is he?"

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Mamlish licked the cigarette into shape. "Why am I here in Lagunitas Territory at all. It's senseless. I had a home appliance store on Barnum, pulling down $20,000 a year. Then I go and fall in love and follow her here where they never heard of an electric can opener or a pop-up toaster. Even the millionaires, the lizards, they make toast in a wood stove or over the fireplace grate. They barely got electricity. All for love, that was me in my twenties. I'm only thirty-four now, but I look fifty. I spent over $40,000 on the wrong woman. How old do I look to you?"

"Thirty-four," said Jolson. "Where's Tad Dibble?"

Outside, a small child began to cry. "They're all like that," said Mamlish. "Always complaining. Either that or they're trying to figure some way to get back into the system. The best they can ever think up is another way of starving."

"Did he get here?" asked Sarah. "Stop all the crap and tell us."

"I never saw him," said Mamlish. "He never got here."

The girl watched him light his cigarette. "You're sure, Mamlish?"

"Yeah, I'm sure." He looked at Jolson. "Dibble pays me ten dollars for my items of info. This is all you get for nothing."

Jolson scratched his chin and narrowed one eye. He reached into his trouser slit and got a $10 silver piece. He walked across the scrap-wood floor and put it in Mamlish's hand. "Okay, now you imagine to yourself I'm Tad Dibble and you give me the details you been saving up."

"I heard a rumor from a couple of railroad dicks who got drunk in Woodville," said Mamlish, putting the money away inside his loose coverall. "They said somebody had a special railroad car hooked up on one of the expresses about a week ago. All that was put inside the private car was a big suitcase. I don't even think the railroad knew about it, not even the big lizards in the capital." He puffed at his cigarette. "That suitcase. I think it might be the suitcase Dibble's so anxious about. I've heard a couple other things, the source of which I'm keeping to myself, indicating such is indeed what happened."

"Maybe," said Jolson. "Where'd that private railroad car go?"

Mamlish laughed, shrugged. "It never reached the end of the line, never reached Janela. Someplace between Woodville and the capital that special car with that special suitcase inside left the track. I don't have any news about where."

"You really haven't," said Sarah, "heard anything about Tad?"

"Nothing," said Mamlish.

Sarah moved to the doorway.

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"I'm going to look around, ask around."

Mamlish shrugged again. "Makes no difference to me." He grinned at Jolson after the girl left. "These reporters run with some pretty odd women. I don't like bad language in a woman. This girl I followed from planet to planet never used a foul word."

Jolson said, "It's your forty thousand." He walked out into the dirt street. A woman in a flowered dress was hugging herself in the doorway of the next shack, watching him with only faint interest. He didn't see any sign of Sarah.

"Where you bound?" asked a thin black man who was seated on a crate in front of his shack.

"Well, now, I never much know."

"Where you been then?"

"I just come down from Zaragata Station."

"Any kind of work up there?"

"None I heard of."

"What I figured," said the man. He started to say something more, stopped. Nodded his head slightly, murmured, "Trouble."

Jolson heard horses coming and turned. From the forest to the left, three lizard men were riding. Two in tan uniforms and one in a frock coat and a bowler hat. "The law," he said.

Barely moving his lips, the black man said, "They're the ones took your friend Dibble."

"Hey, Red," called the lead lizard, one of the uniformed ones. He had a cluster of black dots next to his ear hole, and he scratched at them with a scaled green hand as he rode closer.

Jolson remembered he had red hair and replied, "Pleased to meet you, officer. You sit horse well."

"Let's see your papers, Red," said the lizard policeman.

"I'd sure hate to think there was some trouble getting ready to happen," Jolson said. He reached out his packet of fake IDs.

"Bring them over here," said the second tan-uniformed policeman. He reigned up on the other side of Jolson. His head was held stiff and only his amber eyes seemed to move at all. "Over here."

Jolson handed the papers in the near-leather wallet to the lizard. "My name is Tunky Nesper. Just drifting through, officer. Tumbling with the wind."

"You have a permit for that guitar?" the lizard asked, fingering the wallet. Its pebbled pattern was similar to that of his brown-green hands.

"Well, now," said Jolson, "you got me there, officer, because I been through Lagunitas more times than a one-eyed man can count and I never heard of a permit being needed for a man's guitar."

The civilian lizard's horse

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started to snort and dance, and the bowler hat fell from the lizard's head. The black man caught it and handed it up. "Your hat, Clerk Strangeby."

Clerk Strangeby got his horse under control and his hat back on. He made his mount canter up to Jolson. "I take it you're not on the way to gainful employment."

Jolson shook his head. "No more than dead leaves are being blown anywhere special, Clerk."

The clerk leaned forward, his hands stroking the pommel of his metallic saddle. His small, ridged nostrils fluttered and he smiled. "We'll put aside the usual proceedings with you, since I sense you're brighter than the average deadbeat."

"Well, that's fine," said Jolson. "You're a cut above the usual clerk, if I may say so."

"Yes," said Strangeby. "My job is to help these two officers recruit men to work down on Penny's Farm." He smiled again, and the smile seemed much older than he was, a dry, wrinkled smile. "The plums and nectarines are coming in two weeks early, and we need more men to pick."

"So you folks are out framing yourself a few extra hands."

"I don't think we need carry things that far with you, Nesper. Do you, men?"

"What then?" asked the policeman with Jolson's papers in his hands.

"Would you, Nesper," asked Clerk Strangeby, "like to help us out for only a week or so? Free room and board, indoor plumbing. We'll pay you a dollar a day on top of all that. You see, Nesper, if we trump up a charge, I'll have to sentence you to thirty days on Penny's Farm. This other way you make seven dollars and all you can eat, and in a week you're drifting again like, as you'd say, the wind through the woods."

"Am I right," said Jolson, "in figuring this Penny's Farm is a prison facility?"

"For some," said the clerk. "You have my word you'll be paid and allowed to leave at the end of our plum emergency."

Jolson puckered a cheek. "You the clerk of just the nearest town?"

"No, the whole county," Strangeby told him.

"Well, then I figure you can be trusted."

"You and I will shake hands and these officers will witness it."

"Only thing else a man could ask would be a seal with a ribbon stuck on a piece of expensive paper," said Jolson. If the black man was right, Dibble was probably already at Penny's Farm. This was a quick way to get inside the place. As he shook the lizard's cold hand he glanced around the shack town. Sarah must have slipped away into the woods.

"You're now doing business

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with Strangeby," said the lizard clerk.

"My pleasure," said Jolson.

When the bright sun was straight up over the orchard, the lizard overseer flicked Jolson across the back with his whip. Jolson, halfway up a ladder, went on picking red plums and depositing them in the bucket attached to the peg on his ladder.

"You snubbing me?" called up the lizard, flicking Jolson again harder.

"Oh," said Jolson, "I didn't realize you were being social."

"That crack of the whip means it's noon mealtime," explained the lizard. "Get those plums boxed and then fall in line for the march to the mess hall, Nesper."

"Seems like I haven't eaten since about the day after they invented food," said Jolson, climbing down.

The overseer moved down among the trees, cracking his whip at the other pickers.

Jolson grabbed his work tunic from a limb and after transferring the fat plums carefully from his bucket to a wood box, went down the lane between the fruit trees and waited with the half dozen or so other pickers already there. Slipping the tunic gingerly on, Jolson asked, "Anybody know Keystone Slim?" He hadn't spotted Dibble in the two hours he'd been on Penny's Farm.

None of the workers, four human and three lizard types, answered.

Then a blue-green lizard shook his head at Jolson. "Literary criticism," he whispered.

"What's that you say?"

"They put Keystone Slim in the stockade," said the lizard man. "For literary criticism."

"How'd he come to get involved with that hereabouts?"

"You'll see."

The mess hall had only half a roof, the rest of it had apparently burned away in a long-past fire. Brown sparrows and bright cardinals hopped on the charred beams, chittering in the strong sunlight. A hundred men were at the long raw-wood tables. At each place a metal plate had been set out. Each plate held a boiled potato, a scoop of rice and a scoop of white corn meal, all under thin orange-colored gravy.

Jolson reached for his steel fork and said, "Well, that smells pretty good, when you compare it to the general odor of this place."

"Not yet," warned the blue-green lizard man, who was next to him. "Fold your hands."

"Is this prison farm run along religious lines?"

At the head of the dining hall, shaded by the existing section of roof, stood a fat, green lizard man in a fresh white suit. "I'm sure you're all anxious to find out what happens next," he said to

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the prisoners. "First, however, let me introduce myself to those of you who have just joined us today. I am Managing Warden Collis Enx." He paused, smiled a green smile at them all. "A name so far known chiefly to penologists and to scum such as yourselves. But a name destined, I modestly predict, to be a household word. Enx. 'Not since Enx,' critics will say, 'have I enjoyed a work of speculative fiction so.' Ah, but you grow impatient for your next installment." The white-suited lizard drew a thick manuscript from beneath his arm. "Some of you have come, cringing, up to me and have been kind enough to compare this present work favorably with my earlier, and unfortunately also unpublished speculative novels. One fawning scoundrel among you told me he enjoyed it more than either *A Visit To The Future* or *Looking Around Technopia*. Well, though I don't intend to always be restricted to praise from scum, I am appreciative." He cleared his throat and turned to the midsection of the strung-together pages.

"A 100 Years Hence; Or, What Might Happen Tomorrow If We But Allow It, a Work of Sociological Speculation by Collis Enx. Chapter VI: In The Bosom Of The Future. With what trepidation I looked down upon the vista my ethereal guide had revealed by the simple gesture of reaching out one delicate hand and drawing back the metal-like material that in this curious world one hundred long years hence served for the manufacture of window curtains, as well as, I might add, lap robes, overcoats, blankets and some kinds of rugs and carpets, I cannot quite put into words."

Aloud, Jolson said, "I got a feeling we're going to spend an awful long time getting to nowhere." He picked up his fork and pronged the potato. "I had a pet swink chased his tail just like this fellow writes. Round and round and the best it ever got him was a chunk of his own backside." Jolson ate the potato.

The blue-green lizard nudged him, whispered stiff-lipped. "I don't know what they call it where you come from, Nesper. But what you just voiced goes by the name of 'literary criticism' around here."

"I was hoping so," said Jolson. "I've picked about all the plums I care to on one assignment."

Managing Warden Enx' black eyes were watching Jolson, but he went on with his futuristic romance. "It seemed near incredible to me, as it does still, that in a scant hundred years the whole physiognomy of society as I knew it could be so incredibly transformed and transmuted."

"Seems like a man ought to be able to choose, even in prison,

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whether he wants to take his meals with or without literature," said Jolson in the completely quiet mess hall.

Enx snapped the manuscript closed, said, "You, you babbling outlander scum. There are two things I will not tolerate on Penny's Farm. Do you know what they are?"

Jolson ate a forkfull of rice thoughtfully and then stood up. "Well, I know bad writing isn't one of them."

Enx started to throw his scientific romance at Jolson, but halted and got control. "No, you vernacular scum, the two things I hate are slow workers and literary critics. Guards, into the stockade with him. Grab him at once."

Three big lizard guards had already done that by the time the Managing Warden finished speaking.

Jolson caught his balance in the middle of the six prisoners and said, "Right pleased to meet you all." The guards who'd chucked him into the low room were locking and bolting the heavy door from the outside.

The stockade room was about half as large as a boxcar and made of fitted planking. It was windowless. The hot light of the day fell down through a grilled opening in the low ceiling. "Don't go prancing all over my grandad," said a blue lizard man.

Jolson noticed now an old lizard man sprawled on the sod floor. "I always have a great respect for old folks."

"Respect for the dead is what's in order," said the lizard man. "Grandad passed on last night."

"Why don't you dig a hole and stick that old coot in it," said a gritty man, wearing only the bottom half of a set of thermal underwear.

Jolson said, "I do believe we met at the Zaragata Station saloon."

The gritty man replied, "Yeah, but I had clothes then. I got in another brawl right after you left and soon found myself here. Boy, I hope they smash this whole territory soon or I'm for sure not going to make it."

The bereaved lizard man said, "Without a church service, I'm not going to bury my grandad nowhere."

A fuzzy old man wiped sweat from his bare chest and said, "I don't like old dead relatives underfoot. It's not sanitary, spreads disease. We're going to all catch it."

The gritty man said, "He died from not enough food is my guess. We all got that already."

"I don't like you saying my grandad isn't sanitary," complained the lizard man. He had his wrist bandaged with a yellow neckerchief.

"Anybody who's dead isn't san-

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itary," the fuzzy old man told him. "When I'm dead I'll be the same. I have nothing personal against your late grandfather, though in the week I've been in this hole I found him to be a pretty dull old boy."

A thin young man with sandy hair spoke to Jolson now, "You look like Tunky Nesper."

"And a good thing I do," said Jolson. "Since that's who I am. You look like a fellow named Keystone Slim."

"Yes," said Tad Dibble. The left side of his face was bruised and his lip had two black scars on it.

"Old home week has no place in a serious discussion like we have going on here," said the lizard man.

"Why don't you just call the guard and have him give your poor old grandaddy a decent burial outside someplace," said Jolson.

"I been calling since dawn and they don't pay no attention." The lizard man tapped Jolson on the chest. "Some of us have been in this stockade a while, buddy. You just moved in and already you're trying to take over."

Jolson smiled his sad smile. "Well now, I been tossed and tumbled a lot, not handled with care, but I have always managed to land rightside up."

"Don't mess with him," said the gritty man. "He talks poetry but he'll coldcock you. He's Tunky Nesper."

The lizard man paused, shuffled back from Jolson. "Oh, I didn't catch the name." He bent and caught hold of his grandfather's body. "I'll drag him out of the way so you and your new-found friend can talk."

Jolson guided Dibble toward the wall. "You okay?"

"They beat me up a couple times," said Dibble. "Out in the Pinero Woods and here. Did they get Sarah?"

"No," said Jolson. "She's off and free. Have you thought that Mamlish might have put the police on you?"

"Yes, it's more than likely," said the reporter. "Did you try to contact Henry Carlos Barby yet?"

"The political pundit? No."

"Don't," said Dibble. "He's not on PEO's side any more. Right after I told him I'd located the money, it was taken. I'm pretty sure, with Henry Carlos Barby's help, the money suitcase has been taken to Linol Zee Bemsher's island."

"The newspaper publisher," said Jolson. "His island's down the coast from here, off Low Harbor, isn't it?"

"Right, it's called Funebra Island."

"And where's Henry Carlos Barby now?"

Dibble sighed perspiration off his lips. "What's the date?"

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Jolson told him.

"Barby should still be at his home, a big gingerbread mansion on the outskirts of Low Harbor. Day after tomorrow he'll be out on Funebra Island. Linol Zee Bemsher is having some kind of birthday gala for himself then."

"I'll have to get to Barby before then," said Jolson. "Take his place if possible."

"First," said Dibble, "you have to get out of here. Why are you in, by the way?"

"I heard you were."

"A tough way to set up an interview."

"We'll work out an escape plan," said Jolson. "What time do they feed us?"

Dibble said, "I've been inside this box two days and they haven't yet."

A new morning was showing through the roof slot when Managing Warden Enx came in carrying the guitar. He had on another white suit. He gestured at Jolson and said, "You can't imagine why I'm here, Nesper, you scum."

"Don't tell me you've set your novel to music?"

Enx' green fingers tightened on the neck of the guitar. "Ah, ah," he said at last. "An artist of my stature can't be baited." His tongue flicked out for an instant and his nostrils drooped. "Ironically, Nesper, it is your dubious art which is the subject of my visit."

"Art," said the gritty man. "What about food?"

"Come out into the fresh air with me at once, Nesper, or I'll withdraw my permission for this entire sorry business." Enx spun around and bolted outside.

Jolson nodded at Dibble, followed. The guards slammed the stockade door the moment he was free of the room. The flat fields all around flickered yellow; the fruit trees were thick with picking men. "Now," Jolson said to Enx' wide back, "what did you have in mind?"

"Over there," said the fat lizard. Under a barren tree, half covered with shade, stood a horse-drawn wagon. Stenciled on its side was ETHNOG: A DIVISION OF THE BARNUM SYSTEM FOLK BUREAU. "It seems our arrogant mentors on Barnum can come and go as they please, Nesper, and they have chosen to come to Penny's Farm and record you."

"Beg pardon, sir?"

"Record you, put your dreary rural wailings on some sort of cylinder so that it will be preserved," explained Managing Warden Enx. "So that useless dilettantes on Barnum may recline on lush upholstery and listen to your sod-kicking laments while true artists languish."

"I never said half as much against your work." The stenciled

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words on the wagon looked to be freshly painted. "Matter of fact, you got a nice style, but your plotting is a mite weak."

Enx thrust Jolson's guitar at him. "Take this and report to the wagon. I'm allowing you one hour, Nesper, to make your contribution to posterity. Then, I do think, it'll be time for a little literary discussion between you and me and a bull whip."

"Some folks just can't take criticism." Jolson ambled toward the shaded wagon.

The rear door, which still showed traces of the name Nolan's Wild Animal Show on it, swung open. "Come on, get your ass in here," ordered Sarah. She had on a tan jumpsuit and her chestnut hair was pulled back into double braids. ETHNOG was stenciled on the fabric over her left breast.

Jolson said, "It's like the warden was just now observing. You folks from the big city are a wild lot." He jumped up the hanging wooden steps and into the wagon.

"I've got to leave the door open," Sarah said. "Enx insisted. I had to sweet-talk him for ten minutes to get him to keep guards out of here." Her voice lowered more. "How's Tad? Is he all right?"

Nodding yes, Jolson sat on a wooden bench built under a window. "Right over there in the stockade. He's in pretty good shape. Yourself?"

Sarah's thin, pretty face had a smoky cast and her eyes were faintly red rimmed. "Been awake most of the night, forging papers and filling out fake forms."

"Your idea to get in here this way?" Jolson rested his guitar on his lap and started tuning it. Loud he said, "Things sure tend to get out of tune in captivity."

"I had help, not much, from a Political Espionage Office agent, over in Woodville near the Pinero Woods. Fellow Tad had worked with. He got me some forms and papers to copy after I got the idea these guys would have to let a folk project inside," said the slim girl. "Ethnic stuff and spying, that's about all the attention Barnum pays to most of this planet. Your PEO buddy helped me round up the wagon and letter it." She moved to a hand-wound recording unit opposite Jolson. "He offered to sleep with me, too, but I told him I had too much forging to do. You work like that, too, make love to the girls you run into on your assignments?"

"No," said Jolson. "But I can if you like."

She made a sour smile. "I've got to get Tad and you out of this place within the next hour."

"Shouldn't be hard," said Jolson. "I figure Enx, our gifted Managing Warden, can't keep himself away from here for more than a few minutes. If he does I can coax him over. When he

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looks in I can grab him. Take his place long enough to spring Tad, and the rest of those guys, from the stockade. Use his identity to get us through the gates and away."

Sarah's new smile was less sour. "Yes, that will work." She cranked the square, black recording box and aimed its pickup horn at Jolson. "Tad and I better stay out of Lagunitas Territory for a while. But you'll follow up on the money suitcase?"

"Right."

"We'll have to pretend to record somethin g. Go ahead."

Jolson spit dust away. "Seems to me that songs are like bridges. So, to my way of thinking, the more songs we make, the more rivers we can cross. Why, if we make enough of them, there won't be nowhere we can't go. This here first one I made myself, and it's entitled, 'They Sure Hand Out A Lot of Crap Down on Penny's Farm'."

He began to sing and Sarah turned away.

The six-foot-tall red-haired girl sprinted across the marble wharf and gave Jolson an enthusiastic hug. She bit Jolson's double chin, tongued his left ear, tugged at his wiry white hair. "Enough," said Jolson and set the giant girl aside.

"He's up in one of his warehouses and won't be out for hours," said the girl, who was lovely though big. "Not until he dodders up to the main chateau to dress for his party tonight."

"No doubt," said Jolson. The lizard boatman was watching the big redhead, and he bumped into Jolson and dropped a Gladstone bag on Jolson's foot.

The girl asked, puzzled, "Aren't you going to punch Seaton for that?"

"I'm most sorry, Mr. Barby, sir," said the lizard man, quickly tugging the suitcase off Jolson's foot.

Jolson, who was now a facsimile of Henry Carlos Barby, said, "Next time." He'd learned, during the few hours he'd spent with the real Barby, that the political writer and cartoonist didn't talk much. Even after Jolson had given him a shot from his truth kit, he couldn't get anything but short confessions out of the man. And before Jolson had given Barby a sleeping drug and hidden him in the attic of his rococo mansion, he'd heard nothing about this large, red-haired girl.

"Mr. Barby is being quite nice to you, Seaton."

"That he is, Miss Smith," said the lizard, touching his forehead with one scaly blue-green hand. "It's as my wife says, Miss Smith, you're a kind person. She reads your column in the *Times-Harquebus* and to her you're the only kitchen adviser who can write a recipe that touches the heart."

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"Go away," said Jolson.

"Yes, sir."

The marble wharf turned into steps which led up the steep incline of Linol Zee Bemsher's private island. The stairway was wide and lined with marble urns. Each urn contained a different variety of poppy. Orange, yellow, scarlet, gold. The hillside that hung above the quiet blue water was thick with greenery. Shrubs, trees, fronds, ferns, all bright green in the noonday sun. "He won't tell Linol Zee anything," said Miss Smith.

"Better not." Jolson picked up his suitcase.

The redhead gave a sighing laugh and picked up Jolson. "I've got a spot all picked out in the North East greenhouse, Henry. Let's use that." She went bounding up the broad marble steps, cradling Jolson like a stack of firewood.

"Down," he told her. He figured she was F. P. Smith, who wrote "Heartaches in the Kitchen" for the Bemsher chain of newspapers. He'd been sleep-briefed to the effect that she was Bemsher's mistress exclusively.

"Am I being too aggressive again, Henry?" F. P. Smith reluctantly placed him on his feet. She popped her head forward and kissed his ear again. "I do like older men better than old lizards."

"Understandable." Everything around them smelled of rich flowers. "Money got here?"

F. P. Smith, who was wearing riding clothes and boots, said, "I don't want to talk about Linol Zee's schemes to conquer the Lagunitas Territory." She shrugged her broad shoulders. "This whole planet is just silly. Murdstone, indeed."

"Planet I love best." Jolson began climbing toward the crest of the hill. "Where is he?"

"I told you, Henry. Off with some part or other of his collection," said the girl. "It's pianos today, I think. My god, he has four hundred and eight of the damn things. We have a full-time piano tuner now."

"Music is okay."

F. P. Smith caught up with Jolson and undid the ribbon in her bright hair. Shaking her hair free, she said, "Are you sulking about something, Henry? I think being mixed up in politics is making you awfully cranky."

"My profession."

She said, "How can you keep insisting that drawing those dreadful little pictures constitutes a profession? Like the other day, Henry, when you drew that pig and it had Zaragata Flour Trust lettered on its side. Whoever saw a pig like that?"

"Poetic license."

The red-haired girl ran up the last of the steps two at a time and beat him to the top. "Well,

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let's not argue, Henry. Let's use our stolen hours to better advantage." She sat and tugged off her riding boots, rose and flung them away into the foliage. "I want to abandon myself with you."

A lizard with a trowel and a gardening hat stood up in the brush where F. P. Smith's boots had landed. "It wasn't a serious blow you dealt me, Miss Smith." His left eye-ridge was cut.

"Oh, good morning, Fritch," said the red-haired girl.

"Morning, Miss Smith, Mr. Barby."

"Back to work," Jolson told him, and the lizard gardener ducked away out of sight again.

F. P. Smith strolled away down a graveled path and went into a great wrought-iron and glass greenhouse. When Jolson found her, she was calling, "Are we alone in here?" through cupped hands.

No one answered.

She nodded, smiled open-mouthed at Jolson, and pulled her riding blouse straight up over her head and off. "Over there under the lilacs, I thought. Does that meet with your approval, Henry?"

"One flower's as good as the next." Jolson dropped his Gladstone bag.

Marble houses were scattered across the island, some meant for living in and some for the storing of Linol Zee Bemsher's collections. As night fell, Jolson and the lizard publisher were on the sea-facing open porch of one of the warehouses. Below, men and lizards in longboats and launches were scattering flower petals on the darkening water. "A little whim of mine," said Bemsher. He was already dressed for his birthday party, in a tuxedo and stiff white shirt. Fiddling with his ruby studs, he added, "Fresh-cut flowers teleported from Barnum, Henry Carlos. And see those yellow ones there, being tossed out now. California daisies. From Earth, Earth in the Solar System. Picked this morning."

"Pretty," said Jolson, who was also in a tail coat and white tie. "Money safe?"

"Certainly, Henry Carlos," said Bemsher. "As a whim, a little whim, I have hidden it in a special place. Tomorrow, when I've recovered from tonight's fete, I'll take my private railroad car down to the capital and deposit the suitcase in my vault at the *Times-Harquebus* building."

"Where's the railroad car now?"

"At the siding near Railcross Center, right across the water from us. You should know that, Henry Carlos. You're getting forgetful," said the lizard publisher. "I've been meaning to mention this." He reached into his coat's inner pocket, produced several

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political cartoons clipped from the newspaper. "See these, Henry Carlos. Last Tuesday you drew this pig with a top hat and labeled him Greedy Lettuce Interests. But the Wednesday before, look here now, a pig with a top hat is labeled Ruthless Traction Kings. Just yesterday here comes a pig in a top hat labeled Zaragata Flour Trust. Forgetful, isn't it?"

"No, different pigs."

"They look very much alike to me, to my senior political editor as well," said Bemsher. "And somewhere I have a letter of complaint from the Pig Growers' Association." A large splash sounded from below. "It's Mrs. Doob-Halprin. Always the first to arrive," said Bemsher, leaning far out toward the dark water.

"She fall in?" asked Jolson, who was reaching under his jacket.

"Her horse did," said the publisher. "I don't like her to bring him on the guest boat."

Jolson looked quickly in several directions, opened his truth kit, and pulled out a one-shot needle. He jabbed it into a soft spot beneath the lizard publisher's ear. Bemsher's scaled hand made a brushing gesture, his knees buckled. "Easy now," said Jolson. He caught the big lizard man by the elbow, eased him across the marble porch, dragging him the last few yards. "Start telling me about the money."

"Barnum News Synd really did pay only $50 per cartoon for those reprint rights, Henry Carlos."

"Not that money," said Jolson. He pulled the publisher into the dark marble warehouse vault and propped him against a wooden crate marked BIG LITTLE BOOKS: EARTH, 20TH CENT. "The embezzled money in the suitcase. Where is it?"

"Hot cocoa," said the publisher.

"What?"

"I like a hot cup of cocoa before I go to sleep, Henry Carlos."

"You're not supposed to go to sleep; you're supposed to tell the truth." It occurred to Jolson that the truth-kit needles might be mislabeled. "Where's the suitcase?"

"In the Warehouse 3 safe, Henry Carlos," said Bemsher in a drowsy voice. "Now be still and let me sleep."

"The combination?"

"You are getting forgetful, Henry Carlos. You already know the combination." The big lizard man rocked twice, plumped over on the grey-streaked marble floor.

Jolson hesitated, then scouted the room for an empty crate. He found one in a corner, tugged it back, and hefted the sleeping publisher into it. He replaced his studs and cuff links with Bemsher's ruby ones. When he left the warehouse, he was a reasonable duplicate of the lizard publisher.

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There were acres of bright lawn, lit by flares and paper lanterns. Half a hundred tents of striped and colored canvas had been set up. Lizards in silk suits roamed the grounds playing violins. White-coated men passed with trays of imported pate, ten assorted kinds of fish eggs, chafing dishes filled with cheese fondues, glasses of Earth champagne, tankards of dark Martian ale, Barnum soft drinks. A handsome old woman rode by on a wet horse. Several dozen guests had now been boated from the mainland. Plump lizards in white tie and tux, smoking cigars. Lizard women in bustled white dresses. Human-type men in opera capes and top hats, white gloves. Lovely young girls in fragile gowns, their skin dusted with eggshell-shaded powder.

"Happy birthday, Linol Zee," called Mrs. Doob-Halprin from her horse.

Jolson smiled, waved.

"Your flowers," said a young girl of eighteen with golden hair, "are inspiriting, Mr. Bemsher. Drifting across the water, I felt almost inflamed with enjoyment. The sight of all those floating flowers, gently bobbing up and down, fresh plucked, fostered a strange fervor in me. The journey here aroused dark dreams and set astir odd inclinations."

"They're imported flowers," said Jolson.

"I'm Penny Enx," said the lovely girl. "Adopted daughter of Managing Warden Collis Enx."

"I recognized the style," said Jolson, starting to move away.

"I have a prison farm named after me."

"You deserve probably more." Jolson smiled and hurried on. He'd left the actual Linol Zee Bemsher in Warehouse 5; so 3 should be a couple of warehouses over.

"About those offensive pigs," called a brown lizard in a velvet-collared coat.

"Been taken care of," replied Jolson. He was passing a tent of jugglers when someone else yelled at him.

"Wait. Emergency," shouted a voice Jolson had been using himself until recently.

"Henry Carlos, we thought you were getting so forgetful as to miss my fete entirely," said Jolson, turning.

Henry Carlos Barby was in the same flowered dressing gown Jolson had left him in when he'd hidden him away in his mansion. "Political Espionage," said the cartoonist.

"Though I would have hoped you'd remember that white tie was, if not insisted on, strongly hinted at, Henry Carlos."

"Tied up by a PEO agent. Or a Chameleon Corps man."

"Indeed? That's very unsettling news."

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"Any imposters?"

"There always are a party this size."

"Impersonating me?"

"Why, no, Henry Carlos," said Jolson. He caught the political cartoonist's arm. "We'd better hurry right over to Warehouse 3 and check the safe. I've got the suitcase there."

"Good idea," said Barby. "Gave me two shots. Probably expected second was sleeping drug. Wasn't."

"Oh, so?" The damned Political Espionage Office medical staff had mislabeled.

"Both truth drugs. Double dose I got. I was tied up. Babbling truth. Cleaning woman heard. Got me out. Here I am."

"In the nick of time, Henry Carlos." They had reached Warehouse 3. "You're fleeter of foot than I. Rush in there and open the safe."

"At once." Barby dashed up the marble steps, dodged around two draped nymphs and ran through an arched doorway.

When Jolson got inside the high-vaulted room, Barby was pulling open the door of a safe set in the wall behind a cabinet loaded with salt and pepper shakers. "Is it still there, Henry Carlos?"

"Yes." He moved to close the door of the safe.

"Hold on. Let us double check." The suitcase, a big pebbled black one with brass trim, was in the safe alone. Jolson reached around the political cartoonist and pulled the suitcase out. "You have certainly saved the day, Henry Carlos." He unsnapped the fastenings and looked into the suitcase. It was full of money. "Though I would appreciate it if you'd draw fewer pigs and stop sleeping with F. P."

Barby blinked. "What?"

Jolson hit him on the chin and Barby dropped. Jolson tied the political pundit with his robe sash and gagged him with his handkerchief. After hiding the big man behind a crate marked STUFFED GROUTS: ESMERALDA, BARNUM SYSTEM, CONTEMPORARY, Jolson trotted out into the night with the suitcase.

F. P. Smith, in white silk, was greeting arriving guests on the marble pier. "Linol Zee, dearest, where are you bound?"

"To the mainland for an emergency errand, F. P." He waved to the nearest boatman. "Here, I'm commandeering this launch for the moment. Take me over to my private railroad car at once."

F. P. Smith clasped her hands together between her breasts. "Why are you doing this in the middle of your birthday party?"

Jolson got himself and the suitcase of stolen money into the bright white launch. "Just a little whim," he said and sailed off across the flowers and dark water.

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SCIENCE

THE DISTANCE OF FAR

by Isaac Asimov

ALAS, I HAVE ALWAYS BEEN CHARACTERIZED by a certain naivete, and this characteristic was especially pronounced when I was young.

When I was nineteen, for instance, I was invited to visit a family that lived in a neighboring state. I was told the train station at which to get off. It never occurred to me to ask how to get to the house from the station. It never occurred to me to get a taxi at the station and let the taxi-driver find the house. It never occurred to me to telephone the prospective host and have him come to get me.

The only thing I could think of doing was to ask the ticket-taker at the station how to get to the street I wanted. He directed me up a certain road. Dubiously, I asked, "How far do I have to walk?"

Brusquely, he answered, "Far!"

I sighed, fixed my eye on the distant horizon, and began walking. I had walked several miles before I thought it worth while to ask someone for further directions, for now, I thought, I ought to be nearly there and I could get specific advice on reaching the precise house.

You're probably ahead of me. I had far overshot my mark and had to retrace most of my steps. When the ticket-taker told me I had far to walk, I had neglected to ask even that most elementary of questions: "How far is far?"

"How far is far?" was exactly the question that astronomers were asking themselves as the 19th Century opened. They knew the stars were far, far away, but what was the exact distance of far?

The beginning of the answer came in the 1830s when it was found that even the nearest star was 4.3 light-years away (with 5.8 trillion miles to the light-year). Eventually, roughly a century later, it was discovered that our Galaxy of well over a hundred billion stars stretched out in a vast flat spiral about 100,000 light-years across.

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Distance may lend enchantment as far as many things are concerned, but it is a pain in the neck to astronomers. The farther away a star, the fainter it is, the smaller its parallax, the less noticeable its proper motion.

This means that as a star grows more distant, it becomes ever more difficult to tell just how far the ever farther is. By the use of parallax, for instance, the first exploited (and still the surest) method of measuring stellar distances, one can't probe outward beyond a hundred light-years or so—which confines us to the immediate neighborhood of our Solar system.

Therefore, as the 20th Century opened, the prospects for exploring the universe *beyond* our Galaxy, in terms of judging distances, seemed fairly hopeless.

To be sure, it wasn't at all certain that anything existed beyond the Galaxy. The only possibilities in that direction were certain foggy patches in the sky called nebulae. Some of these nebulae were definitely inside our Galaxy, but others might possibly not be. These suspicious nebulae grew to be of particular, and increasing interest in the opening years of the 20th Century.

The best hope for gaining knowledge of any kind concerning the very distant lay in those astronomic measurements that were independent of distance. The most important measurement of this sort was the shift in spectral lines caused by the radial velocity of some astronomic object; that is, its motion toward us (in which case the shift is toward the blue-violet end of the spectrum) or away from us (in which case it is toward the orange-red end).

The farther away a star, the dimmer it is, the harder it is to obtain a spectrum out of its light, the trickier it is to detect and measure the position of the spectral lines, and the more difficult it is to measure the shift of those lines. To that extent, radial velocity is harder to measure as distance increases. However, if the spectrum can be obtained at all, then the radial velocity can be measured with roughly equal accuracy regardless of distance. The farthest object capable of yielding a photographable spectrum with recognizable lines can have its motion toward us or away from us determined as precisely as the nearest.

In the latter part of the 19th Century, radial velocities were measured for many stars. (Thousands of radial velocities are now known.) The figures for such stellar radial velocities fall into a relatively narrow range. For some stars, the radial velocity is virtually zero. (After all, some stars may be paralleling our own course or may be cutting directly across our own line of motion at right angles, in such a way that, at the

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moment, they are neither approaching nor receding. At the other extreme, some stars have a radial velocity of as much as 400 or 500 kilometers per second relative to the Sun. Such extremes are exceptional.) Most stars have radial velocities of between 10 and 40 kilometers per second, and there seems no preference between approach and recession. Some stars approach and some recede.

From radial velocities, certain conclusions can be drawn as to proper motion (that is, motion across the line of sight). Such proper motion can only be measured directly for the nearest stars, and the radial velocity of a particular star has no necessary relationship to the proper motion of that star. Over a large number of stars, however, there is a statistical relationship, and this can be used to gain a notion as to the true motion, in three dimensions, relative to our Sun.

When this is done, it seems, at first glance, that the stars in the Galaxy are like a swarm of bees moving at random in all directions. Closer investigation made it seem that a certain amount of order was to be found. In 1904, a Dutch astronomer, Jacobus Cornelius Kapteyn, showed that the stars were moving in two streams, the motion of one being in the direction opposite to the other.

Then, in 1925, another Dutch astronomer, Jan Hendrik Oort, explained these streams in terms of the rotation of the Galaxy. In general, the farther an astronomical object from the gravitational center about which it rotates, the slower its orbital motion. In our Solar system, the more distant a planet is from the Sun, the more slowly it moves in its orbit. In our Galaxy, the more distant a star is from the Galactic center, the more slowly it rotates in its orbit about the center.

Stars more distant from the Galactic center than our Sun is would move more slowly than the Sun. We would gain on them and they would seem to drift backward relative to ourselves. Stars closer to the Galactic center than our Sun is would move more quickly and would drift forward. Hence, we would find two streams in opposite directions.

Radial velocities, then, turned out to be an extremely powerful tool, for they gave us a picture of the vast, slow turning of the huge Galaxy on its axis, a picture we could scarcely have gained with such certainty in any other way.

Yet this was only the beginning—

The next stage in the dramatic victories of radial velocity began in 1912, when the American astronomer, Vesto Melvin Slipher,* measured the radial velocity of the Andromeda Nebula. This was one of

* *Slipher died in 1969, at the patriarchal age of 94.*

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those nebulae which some astronomers felt might be outside our Galaxy. It was, indeed, the only naked-eye nebula which labored under such a suspicion and might therefore very likely be the farthest object the human eye could see without aid.

Still, however far it might be, Slipher could get out of its light a spectrum marked by spectral lines. He could identify the spectral-line pattern and could measure how far that pattern had shifted from the normal position. He could tell the nebula's radial velocity with equal ease, whether it were outside the Galaxy or inside it.

The shift was blueward, and Slipher concluded that the Andromeda Nebula was approaching the Sun at a speed of 200 kilometers per second; a figure within the range of the radial velocities observed for astronomical objects generally. Interesting as an item in the astronomical data-books but not particularly noteworthy!

Slipher's success led him to try to measure the velocity of other nebulae which resembled the Andromeda but were fainter and, therefore, presumably more distant. By 1917 he had succeeded in measuring the radial velocities of fifteen of them.

And by then, he was rather puzzled. In the absence of any reason to expect anything else, scientists usually begin by supposing that any set of measurements will show a random distribution. In other words, if the radial velocities of a number of nebulae are measured, approximately half ought to be approaching us and half ought to be receding from us.

That proved not to be the case. Of the fifteen nebulae whose radial velocities were measured by Slipher, only two (the Andromeda and one other) were approaching. The other thirteen were all receding from us.

Worse yet, the recession was unexpectedly fast. The thirteen which were receding were doing so at an average velocity of 640 kilometers per second, an average well above the extreme radial velocity observed for any star.

If the nebulae were part of our Galaxy, these measurements were highly disturbing. Why should one set of objects within the Galaxy be receding from us almost in toto and be doing so with such high velocities, when nothing else within the Galaxy acted similarly?

This uniqueness in properties almost argued, in itself, for the extra-Galactic nature of the nebulae.

Fortunately, the question as to whether the nebulae were Galactic or extra-Galactic did not have to depend on so subtle a point. In 1917, while Slipher was worrying about this, another American astronomer, Edwin Powell Hubble, was making use of a new 100-inch telescope on

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Mt. Wilson, in California. This telescope was powerful enough to resolve the till-then-featureless haze of the Andromeda Nebula and show that it was a collection of unprecedentedly faint stars—faint because of their great distance.

That was the final piece of evidence required to show that the Andromeda Nebula, and other similar objects, were collections of stars far outside our Galaxy and were, indeed, galaxies in their own right. From that point in time, it became proper to speak of the Andromeda Galaxy, rather than of the Andromeda Nebula, and to distinguish our own home-collection of stars as the Milky Way Galaxy.*

This helped matters. It seemed reasonable that objects outside our Galaxy should act differently in some ways than objects inside our Galaxy. It was not utterly surprising that galaxies moved more rapidly relative to each other, than did the stars within a given galaxy—just as you might not be surprised to learn that automobiles moved, on the average, more rapidly on highways outside cities than on the streets within cities.

That still left the disproportionately high number of galaxies that were receding from us—13 out of 15.

But then perhaps Slipher had just happened, by a fantastic run of luck, to pick those galaxies that were receding from us. Surely, if additional galaxies were studied, the recessions and approaches might even out.

The American astronomer, Milton La Salle Humason, took up the task. It wasn't easy. Slipher had naturally studied the brightest galaxies, those that would yield a spectrum with the least difficulty. Humason had to pass on to dimmer ones. He was forced to make photographic exposures of days at a time in order to pick up the spectra of the tiny dim patches of nebulosity that was all that could be made up of the more distant galaxies. The difficulties were considerable, but he managed.

To his astonishment, though, all he ever got were redward-shifts! It seemed as though *all* the galaxies (except two of the closest) were receding. What was worse was that the redward-shifts were enormous in size, representing velocities not of hundreds, but of thousands of kilometers per second. In 1928, Humason measured the redward-shift of a galaxy called NGC 7619, and found this measurement to indicate a velocity of recession of 3800 kilometers per second.

* *If you are curious, the Andromeda Galaxy is currently thought to be about 2.2 million light-years from us, and as far as those objects visible to the unaided eye are concerned, that is the ultimate distance of far.*

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What made everything worst of all was that, in general, the dimmer the galaxy (and, therefore, presumably the farther from us it was) the more rapidly it seemed to be receding.

This was a great deal for astronomers to swallow. To have the velocity of a galaxy depend upon its distance from *us* gives us far too much importance. Why should distance from little-old-us influence the manner in which a galaxy moves? Is there something about our Galaxy that repels other galaxies, and does this force of repulsion grow stronger with distance? For a while, Albert Einstein played with this notion, but no one has ever detected any force, attractive or repulsive, that grew stronger with distance, and the possibility was dropped.

It became necessary, then, for astronomers to take another and harder look at the redward-shift. Remember, it is the redward-shift that is measured; this is hard observation that must be accepted. To conclude from this, however, that a galaxy is receding, is pure deduction and may be wrong. To be sure, since the mid-19th Century, astronomers had been taking it for granted that a redward-shift meant a recession of the light-source, but was that the only possible thing it could mean?

Light, after all, travelled over long, long distances in reaching us from the distant galaxies; distances much longer than those traversed from stars within our galaxies. Perhaps something happened to light over the extra-long distances that imposed a redward-shift on it even though the light-source (a galaxy, in this case) was stationary, or almost stationary, relative to us. This might mean that redward-shifts could mean velocities of recession in connection with the stars inside our Galaxy, but something else where other galaxies were concerned.

Could it be, for instance, that very thin wisps of dust and gas between the galaxies, building up over millions of light-years, gradually absorbed some of the light travelling toward us? Perhaps it absorbed short-wave light preferentially, removing part of the blue-violet end of the spectrum preferentially, and leaving the galaxies redder than they would normally be.

Amateurs, considering the matter of the redward-shift of the galaxies, sometimes come up with this idea (as did the author of the book I referred to at the beginning of last month's article). This is not surprising, for actually the idea is valid as far as it goes. The light of distant galaxies *would* be reddened in this way, but only by light-subtraction at the blue-violet end of the spectrum; *not* by any shift in wavelength. This effect, in other words, would produce a reddening, but *not* a redward-shift of the spectral lines.

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Well, then, suppose that light, as it travels through space over long distances, gradually loses its energy at a rate so slow it becomes noticeable only over inter-galactic gaps. The wavelength depends upon the energy content of the light, so this means that as light travels over millions of light-years, its wavelength gradually increases. Every wavelength, including those occupied by spectral lines, shifts toward the red end of the spectrum. Naturally, the farther a galaxy, the more energy its light loses and the greater the redward-shift. The beauty of this is that it accounts for the increasing redward-shift with distance without granting our Galaxy some special importance it cannot have. The distance is important in itself.

This notion of "tired light" (as it is usually referred to) has its difficulties, however. Unless you want to abandon the law of conservation of energy, which scientists are *extremely* reluctant to do, you must suppose that as the light gradually loses its energy, something else gains it. Astronomers, so far, cannot suggest the manner in which light energy is transferred over intergalactic distances in such a way as to produce a redward-shift. The proper energy-receiver is missing. (For instance, obstructing molecules in space will absorb a photon of light, but will not then necessarily re-radiate a somewhat less energetic photon *in the same direction* as the original photon was travelling. Gas and dust will absorb or scatter light but will do nothing more, and something more is required to fit the observations.)

Furthermore, the loss of energy by light, if sufficient to account for the redward-shift in galaxies, is also sufficient to be detectable in intra-Galactic observations, and it isn't.

The tired-light hypothesis is, therefore, found wanting both in theory and observation, and it must be (usually reluctantly) abandoned—at least until further information in its favor turns up.

But here's something else. In 1916, Einstein advanced his General Theory of Relativity and pointed out that light, moving against the pull of a gravitational field loses energy (without violating the law of conservation of energy). Light radiating outward from any star is moving against the pull of the gravitational field of that star so the light from any star or galaxy should show a gravitational redward-shift.

Is it possible, then, that the redward-shifts of the galaxies are gravitational in origin, rather than recessional.

The trouble is that under ordinary circumstances, this shift is so small as to be all but undetectable. In order to make the gravitational redward-shift large enough to be detected, a large gravitational field is in itself insufficient; it must be intense. A sufficiently intense grav-

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itational field is produced only by large quantities of matter condensed to super-density—by a white-dwarf star, for instance.

To suppose, then, that the redward-shifts of the distant galaxies are gravitational in origin is to suppose fantastic densities for them. Even if this were swallowed, those densities would have to increase steadily with distance from us, and it is even more difficult to see why our location should affect the density of a distant galaxy than its velocity.

This brings us back to velocity of recession as the only reasonable explanation of the redward-shifts, and to the puzzling relationship between this velocity and distance from us.

Hubble tackled the matter. He made use of every possible method for determining the relative distances of the galaxies. It is possible to detect in a few of the nearer ones certain pulsating stars called Cepheids.* From their rate of pulsation and their apparent brightness, their relative distances (and, therefore, the relative distances of the galaxies containing them) could be determined.

In more distant galaxies, Cepheids could not be made out, but a few extremely luminous stars could be seen. Assuming that there is some limit to luminosity and that the most luminous stars in each galaxy are at this limit and are therefore roughly equal in luminosity, the relative distances of the galaxies containing them can be determined.

Finally, where galaxies are too distant to reveal any stars at all, it may be assumed that their total luminosities are roughly equal and, from their apparent overall brightness, their relative distances may be determined.

Once this was done, the velocities of recession, as measured by the red-shift, come so close to bearing a direct relationship to the distance of the galaxy from ourselves that, in 1929, Hubble announced this direct relationship as really existing. This is called "Hubble's Law." If galaxy A is x times as far from us as galaxy B, then galaxy A is receding from us x times as quickly as galaxy B.

Unexpectedly then, if Hubble's Law is correct, astronomers suddenly had a very powerful tool for measuring the distances of even the farthest visible objects. Once the distances of the nearer galaxies could be estimated by some method (any method) not involving the redward-shift, then the distance of any farther galaxy was instantly known.

In the 1950s, the 200-inch telescope could detect galaxies which were probably up to 1.5 billion light-years distant, and in the 1960s

*. *See THE FLICKERING YARDSTICK (F & SF, March 1960).*

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quasars* were discovered with distances from us of up to 8 or 9 billion light-years, while the edge of the observable Universe can be calculated as being 12.5 billion light-years distant.

But still the reason for the relationship between distance and recessional velocity eludes us.

The answer came from Einstein's General Theory. In it, Einstein had worked out a set of "field equations" which described the overall properties of the Universe. (This was the beginning of modern cosmology.) Einstein solved the field equations in such a way as to picture a static Universe, one in which the overall density of matter remained constant.

In 1917, however, the Dutch astronomer, Willem de Sitter, pointed out that another solution was possible, one in which the overall density of matter in the Universe was constantly decreasing with time.

One way of imagining such a constant decrease of overall density is to suppose that the Universe consists of particles of matter of fixed density which are forever moving apart from each other at constant velocity. The Universe would then consist of the unchanging particles plus more and more inter-particular space and the overall density would go down.

De Sitter worked out his solution as a purely theoretical exercise, but when Hubble worked out his Law, it did not take long to see that that Law was a consequence of the de Sitter suggestion.

In the Universe, the individual galaxies may be considered as particles. They are held together by the mutual gravitational attraction of their constituent stars, so that the overall density within a galaxy remains unchanged with time. In fact, a number of galaxies, relatively close to each other, can remain bound together by gravitational forces, so that the overall density within galactic clusters will remain unchanged. When I speak of galaxies in the following paragraphs, then, let it be understood that I refer either to isolated galaxies or to gravitationally-bound clusters of galaxies.

If the galaxies move steadily apart, the overall density of the matter in the Universe constantly decreases. We are then picturing an "expanding Universe."

In a constantly expanding Universe, an observer on some one of the galaxies will see all the other galaxies receding. Furthermore, it is easy to show (though I won't try to do so here) that in such a Universe Hubble's Law must hold. The farther a galaxy from the Observer's

* *See BB OR NOT BB, THAT IS THE QUESTION (F & SF, August 1966).*

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Galaxy, the faster the velocity of recession of the galaxy relative to the Observer's Galaxy.

This removes the apparent paradox from Hubble's Law. There is no magic about us, no queer influence in our Galaxy that relates recessional velocity to distance from *us*. What we see, we would also see from any other galaxy in the Universe.*

It is startling to think, then, that what began with an Austrian physicist listening to trumpet players sounding notes as they moved past him on a railroad flat car** ended less than a century later by producing a grand vision of a Universe billions of light-years across, engaged in a steady and colossal expansion.

It is this kind of procession from the utterly prosaic to the unimaginably ultra that is what can happen when the game of science is played correctly.

* *Nor is the approach of the Andromeda Galaxy a violation of the principle of the Expanding Universe. The Andromeda Galaxy is part of a cluster of galaxies which also includes our own Milky Way Galaxy. The two galaxies along with some two dozen "dwarf" galaxies are gravitationally bound, and move about relative to each other independently of the general expansion of the Universe.*

** *See PLAYING THE GAME (F & SF, May 1970).*

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Zenna Henderson's new story is an ultimately chilling fantasy about a child who believed without reservation in the absolute truth of every story she heard. Belief can be a negative thing. . .

THE BELIEVING CHILD

by Zenna Henderson

NO ONE SEEING ME SITTING here, my hands stubbornly relaxed, my face carefully placid, could possible know that a terrible problem is gnawing at me. In fact, I can't believe it myself. It couldn't possibly be. And yet I've got to solve it. Oh, I have lots of time to find a solution! I have until 2:15. And the hands of my watch are scissoring out the minutes relentlessly. 1:45. What will I do! What will I do if 2:15 comes and I haven't got through to Dismey? She's sitting over there by Donna now, her scraggly hair close to Donna's shining, well-nourished curls.

That hair of Dismey's. I saw it before I saw her face that October morning and knew, with a sigh for the entry of my 45th child, that she was from the campground—a deprived child. Somehow it always shows in their hair. I breathed a brief prayer that she would be clean at least. She was—almost painfully so. Her hands and ankles were rusty with chapping, not with dirt. Her sagging dress, a soft faded blue down the front, with a hint of past pattern along the side seams and at the collar, was clean, but not ironed. Her lank, bleached-burlap hair lifelessly bracketed her thin face and descended in irregular tags roughly to her shoulders. But its combed-with-water patterns were bisected by a pink-clean parting.

Well, I welcomed her to my first grade classroom, pleased that she was a girl. I was so weary of the continual oversupply of little boys. I was surprised that her mother had come with her. Usually from that area, parents just point the kids toward the bus stop and give them a shove. But there the mother was, long in the wrist and neck and face. She was wearing levi's and a faded plaid shirt that had safety pins for buttons. She was older than I'd expect Dismey's mother to be. Her narrow shoulders were twisted to one side and a deep convex curve bent her

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spine out against the shirt. I couldn't tell if it was the result of a lifetime of sagging, or was an actual deformity. Her left cheek sucked in against no-teeth, and the sharp lines that crisscrossed her face reminded me of the cracklings of thin mud drying in the sun.

"Dismey?" I asked. "How do you spell it?"

"You're the teacher," said her mother, her voice a little hoarse as though not used much. "Spell it the way you want. Her name's Dismey Coven. She's six. She ain't been to school none yet. We been with the cabbages in Utah."

"We're supposed to have a birth certificate—" I ventured.

"Never had none," said Mrs. Coven shortly. "She was born anyway. In Utah. When we were there with the cabbage."

So I had her repeat the name and stabbed at the spelling. I put down October for a birthdate, counting backwards far enough to give her a birth year to match her age—usual procedure, only sometimes they don't even know the month for sure—the crops harvesting at the time, yes, but not the month.

All this time the mother had been clutching Dismey's shoulders with both hands, and Dismey had just stood there, her back pressed against her mother, her face quiet, her pale eyes watching. When I'd got all the necessary information, including the fact that unless we had free lunch for Dismey, she wouldn't eat, the mother shoved Dismey at me abruptly and told her, "Mind the teacher." And said to me, "Teach her true. She's a believin' child."

And she left without another word or a backward glance.

So then, where to seat my 45th child in my 44-seat room. I took a quick census. Every child there. Not a vacant chair available. The only unoccupied seat in the room was the old backless chair I used for a stepstool and for a sin-seat in the Isolation Corner. Well, Bannie could do with a little more distance between him and Michael, and he knew the chair well, so I moved him over to the library table with it and seated Dismey by Donna, putting her in Donna's care for the day.

I gave Dismey a pencil and crayolas and other necessary supplies and suggested that she get acquainted with the room, but she sat there, rigid and unmoving for so long that it worried me. I went over to her and printed her name for her on a piece of our yellow practice paper.

"Here's your name, Dismey. Maybe you'd like to see if you can write it. I'll help you."

Dismey took the pencil from me, holding it as though it were a dagger. I had to guide every finger to its correct place before she could hold it for writing. We

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were both sweating when we got through the name. It had been like steering a steel rod through the formation of the letters. Dismey showed no signs of pleasure—shy or overt—that most beginners exhibit when confronted with their first attempt at their names. She looked down at the staggering letters and then up at me.

"It's your name, Dismey," I smiled at her and spelled it to her. She looked down again at the paper, and the pencil wavered and swung until she had it dagger-wise once more. She jabbed the point of the pencil down on the next line. It stabbed through the paper. With a quick, guilty hand, she covered the tear, her shoulders hunching to hide her face.

I opened the box of crayons and shook them out where she could see the colors, luring her averted face back towards me.

"Maybe you'd rather color. Or go around and see what the other children are doing." And I left her, somewhat cheered. At least she had known that a line is for writing on! *That* is a mark of maturity!

All the rest of the morning she roosted tentatively on the front four inches of her chair, stiff as a poker. At recess, she was hauled bodily by Donna to the bathroom and then to the playground. Donna dutifully stayed by her side, wistfully watching the other children playing, until time to drag Dismey to the line and to point out that there was a girl line and a boy line.

After recess, Dismey unbent—once. Just enough to make two very delicate lines on a paper with her red crayon when she thought I wasn't looking. Then she just sat staring, apparently entranced at the effect. It was most probable that she had never held a crayon before.

Lunchtime came and in the cafeteria she stared at her plate a minute and then ate so fast with spoon and scooping fingers that she nearly choked.

"Would you like some more?" I asked her. She looked at me as though I were crazy for asking. She slowed down midway through her third helping. There was a quiver along her thin cheek when she looked at me. It could have been the beginning of a smile. Donna showed her where to put her dirty dishes and took her out to the playground.

During that first afternoon, she finally drew a picture—an amazingly mature one—of three wobbly plates full of food and a lopsided milk carton with a huge straw in it. Under Donna's urging she took up her red crayon and, down at the bottom, she carefully copied from her name paper a *Di,* but when the *s* turned backward on her, she covered it with a

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quick, guilty hand and sat rigid until dismissal time.

I worried about Dismey that afternoon after the children were gone. I was used to frightened, withdrawn children, terrified by coming into a new school, but nothing quite so drastic as Dismey. No talking, no laughing, no smiles, or even tears. And such wariness—and yet her mother had called her a believing child. But then, there's believing and believing. Belief can be a very negative thing, too. Maybe what Dismey believed the most was that you could believe in nothing good—except maybe three platefuls of food and a red crayon. Well, that was a pretty good start!

Next morning I felt a little more cheerful. After all, yesterday had been Dismey's first day at a new school. In fact, it had been her first day at any school. And children adjust wonderfully well—usually.

I looked around for Dismey. I didn't have to look far. She was backed into the angle of the wall by the door of our room, cornered by Bannie and Michael. I might have known. Bannie and Michael are my thorns-in-the-flesh this year. Separately they are alert, capable children, well above average in practically everything. But together! Together they are like vinegar and soda—erupting each other into the wildest assortment of devilment that two six-year-olds could ever think up. They are flint and steel to the biggest blaze of mischief I've ever encountered. Recently, following a Contradict Everything Phase, they had lapsed into a Baby Phase, complete with thumb-sucking, baby talk and completely tearless infantile wailing—the noise serving them in the same capacity as other children's jet-zooming or six-gun banging or machine-gun rattling.

The two didn't see me coming and I stood behind them a minute, curious to see just what they had dreamed up so soon to plague Dismey with.

"And it's a 'lectric paddle and it's specially for girls," said Bannie solemnly.

"You stood up in the swing and the 'lectric paddle is specially for girls that stand up in swings," amplified Michael soberly. "And it hurts real bad."

"It might even kill you," said Bannie with relish.

"Dead," said Michael, round of eye that shifted a little to send a glint of enjoyment at Bannie.

Dismey hunched one shoulder and drew a shaking hand across her stricken cheek. "I didn't know—" she began.

"Of course she didn't know," I said sternly. "Bannie and Michael, indoors!" I unlocked the door and shooed them in. Then I put my arms around a rigid Dismey. I could feel her bones under her scant flesh and flimsy dress.

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"It isn't so, Dismey," I said. "There isn't any electric paddle. There's no such thing. They were just teasing you. But we do have a rule about standing up in the swings. You might fall out and get hurt. Here comes Donna now. You go play with her and she'll tell you about our rules. And don't believe Bannie and Michael when they tell you bad things. They're just trying to fool you."

In the room I confronted the two completely unrepentant sinners.

"You weren't kind to Dismey," I said. "And she's our new student. Do you want her to think that we're all unkind here at our school?"

They had no answer except Bannie's high-pitched giggle that he uses when he is embarrassed.

"Besides that, what you told her wasn't true."

"We were just playing," said Michael, trading side-glances with Bannie.

"Telling things that aren't true isn't a very good way to have fun," I reminded them.

"We were just playing," said Michael, while Bannie had recourse to his thumb.

"But Dismey didn't know you were only playing," I said. "She thought you were telling the truth."

"We were just playing," said Bannie around his thumb.

After we had gone around and around a couple more times, I sternly sent them outside. The two ran shrieking, holding the seats of their levi's, yelling, "We got a licking! With the 'lectric paddle! A-wah! A-wah!"

And my heart sank. I had a premonition that the Baby Phase was about to give way to a Tease Dismey Phase.

Dismey came slowly to life in the classroom. She began to function with the rest of the class, catching up with ease with the children who had been in school a month before she arrived. She swooped through long and short vowels and caught us in initial consonants. She showed a flare for drawing and painting. Her number work and reading flowed steadily into her—and stayed there instead of ebbing and flowing as it does for so many children. But all the rest of the classroom activities paled to insignificance as far as Dismey was concerned before the wonder of story time. It was after the first few sessions of story time immediately following the afternoon recess that I realized what Dismey's mother meant by calling her a believin' child.

Dismey believed without reservation in the absolute truth of every story she heard. She was completely credulous.

It's hard to explain the difference between the fairy tales

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for her and for the rest of the class. The others believed wholeheartedly while the story was in progress and then set it aside without a pang. But there was a feeling of eager acceptance and—and recognition—that fairly exuded from Dismey during story time that sometimes almost made my flesh creep. And this believing carried over to our dramatization of the stories too, to such an extent that when Dismey was the troll under the bridge for The Billy Goats Gruff, even Bannie paled and rushed over the bridge, pell-mell, forgetting the swaggering challenge that he as the Big Billy Goat was supposed to deliver. And he flatly refused to go back and slay the troll.

But this credulity of hers served her a much worse turn by making her completely vulnerable to Bannie and Michael. They had her believing, among other unhappy things, that a lion lived in the housing of the air-raid siren atop the cafeteria. And when the Civilian Defense truck came to check the mechanism and let the siren growl briefly, Dismey fled to the room, white-eyed and gasping, too frightened to scream. She sat, wet-faced and rigid, half the afternoon in spite of all my attempts to reassure her.

Then one day I found her crying out by the sidewalk, when she should have been in class. Tears were falling without a sound as she rubbed with trembling desperation at the sidewalk.

"What's the matter, Dismey?" I asked, squatting down by her, the better to see. "What are you doing?"

"My mama," she choked out, "I hurt my mama!"

"What do you mean?" I asked, bewildered.

"I stepped on a crack," she sobbed. "I didn't mean to but Bannie pushed me. And now my mama's back is busted! Can you fix a busted back? Does it cost very much?"

"Oh, Dismey, honey!" I cried, torn between pity and exasperation. "I told you not to believe Bannie. 'Step on a crack and break your mother's back' isn't for true! It's just a singing thing the children like to say. It isn't really so!"

I finally persuaded Dismey to leave the sidewalk, but she visibly worried all the rest of the day and shot out of the door at dismissal time as though she couldn't wait to get home to reassure herself.

Well, school went on and we switched from fairy tales to the Oz books, and at story time every day I sat knee-deep in a sea of wondering faces and experienced again with them my own enchantment when I was first exposed to the stories. And Dismey so firmly believed in every word I read that Michael and Bannie had her terror-stricken and fugitive every

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time a dust devil whirled across the playground. I finally had to take a decisive hand in the affair when I found Michael struggling with a silently desperate Dismey, trying to pry her frenzied hands loose from the playground fence so the whirlwind could pick *her* up and blow *her* over the Deadly Desert and into the hands of the Wicked Witch of the West.

Michael found his levi's not impervious to a ping-pong paddle, which was the ultimate in physical punishment in our room. He also found not to his liking the Isolation outside the room, sitting forlornly on the steps by our door for half a day, but the worst was the corporate punishment he and Bannie had visited upon them. They were forbidden to play with each other for three days. The sight of their woebegone, drooping figures cast a blight over the whole playground, and even Dismey forgave them long before the time was up.

But her tender-heartedness left her only more vulnerable to the little devils when they finally slipped back into their old ways.

We finished the first of the Oz books and were racing delightedly into the first part of *The Magic of Oz,* and there it was! Right on page 19! We all looked at it solemnly. We wrote it on the board. We contemplated it with awe. *A real live magic word!* All we had to do now to work real magic was to learn how to pronounce the word.

Therein lay the difficulty. We considered the word. PYRZQXGL. We analyzed it. We knew all the letters in it, but there were no vowels except 'and sometimes Y.' How could you sound out a word with no vowels and no place to divide it into syllables? Surely a word that long would have more than one syllable!

"We'll have to be careful even trying to say it, though," I warned. "Because if you do find the right way to pronounce it, you can—well, here it tells you—'. . . transform anyone into beast, bird or fish, or anything else, and back again, once you knew how to pronounce the mystical word.' "

"You could even change yourself. Wouldn't it be fun to be a bird for a while? But that's what you have to watch carefully. Birds can talk in the Land of Oz, but can they talk here?"

The solemn consensus was no, except for parakeets and myna birds.

"So if you changed yourself into a bird, you couldn't ever change yourself back. You'd have to stay a bird unless someone else said the magic word for you. So you'd better be careful if you learn the way to say it."

"How *do* you say it, teacher?" asked Donna.

"I've never found out," I

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sighed. "I'll have to spell it every time I come to it in the story because I can't say it. Maybe someday I'll learn it. *Then* when it's Quiet Time, I'll turn you all into Easter Eggs, and we'll have a really quiet Quiet Time!"

Laughing, the children returned to their seats and we prepared for our afternoon work. But first, most of the children bent studiously to the task of copying PYRZQXGL from the board to take the word home to see if anyone could help them with it. It was all as usual, the laughing, half-belief of most of the children in the wonderful possibilities of the word, and the solemn intensity of Dismey, bent over a piece of paper, carefully copying, her mouth moving to the letters.

The affair of Bannie and Michael versus Dismey went on and on. I consulted with the boys' parents, but we couldn't figure out anything to bring the matter to a halt. There seemed to be an irresistible compulsion that urged the boys on in spite of everything we could do. Sometimes you get things like that, a clash of personalities—or sometimes a meshing of personalities that is inexplicable. I tried to attack it from Dismey's angle, insisting that she check with me on everything the boys tried to put over on her before she believed, but Dismey was too simple a child to recognize the subtlety with which the boys worked on occasion. And I tried ignoring the whole situation, thinking perhaps I was making it a situation by my recognition of it. A sobbing Dismey in my arms a couple of times convinced me of its reality.

Then there came yesterday. It was a raw blustery day, bone-chilling in spite of a cloudless sky, a day that didn't invite much playing outdoors after lunch. We told the children to run and romp for fifteen minutes after we left the cafeteria and then to come back indoors for the rest of the noon period. I shivered in my sweater and coat, blinking against the flood of sunlight that only made the cold, swirling winds across the grounds feel even colder. The children, screaming with excitement and release, swirled with the winds, to and fro, in a mad game of tag that consisted in whacking anyone handy and running off madly in all directions shrieking, "You're it, had a fit, and can't get over it!"

It didn't take long for the vitality of some of our submarginals to run short, and when I saw Treesa and Hannery huddling in the angle of the building, shaking in their cracked, oversized shoes as they hugged their tattered sweaters about them, I blew the whistle that called the class indoors.

The clamor and noise finally settled down to the happy hum of Quiet Time, and I sighed and re-

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laxed, taking a quick census of the room, automatically deducting the absentees of the day. I straightened and checked again.

"Where's Dismey?" I asked. There was a large silence. "Does anyone know where Dismey is?"

"She went to the restroom with me," said Donna. "She's afraid to go alone. She thinks a dragon lives down in the furnace room and she's scared to go by the steps by herself."

"She wuz play tag weez us," said Hannery, with his perennial sniff.

"Maybe she go'd to beeg playgroun'," suggested Treesa. "We don' s'pose to go to beeg playgroun'," she added virtuously.

Then I heard Bannie's high, embarrassed giggle.

"Bannie and Michael, come here."

They stood before me, a picture of innocence. "Where is Dismey?" I asked. They exchanged side-glances. Michael's shoulders rose and fell. Bannie looked at his thumb, dry of, lo, these many weeks, and popped it into his mouth.

"Michael," I said, taking hold of his shoulders, my fingers biting. "Where is Dismey?"

"We don't know," he whined, suddenly afraid. "We thought she was in here. We were playing tag."

"What did you do to Dismey?" I asked, wondering wildly if they had finally killed her.

"We—we—" Michael dissolved into frightened tears before the sternness of my face and the lash of my words.

"We didn't do nothing," cried Bannie, taking his thumb out of his mouth, suddenly brave for Michael. "We just put a rock on her shadow."

"A rock on her shadow?" My hands dropped from Michael's shoulders.

"Yeth." Bannie's courage evaporated and his thumb went back into his mouth. "We told her she couldn't move."

"Sit down," I commanded, shoving the two from me as I stood. "All of you remember the rules for when I'm out of the room," I reminded the class. "I'll be right back."

The playground was empty except for the crumpled papers circling in an eddy around the trash can. I hurried over to the jungle gym. No Dismey. I turned the corner of the Old Building and there she was, straining and struggling, her feet digging into the ground, the dirt scuffed up over her ragged shoes, her whole self pulling desperately away from the small rock that lay on her shadow. I saw—or thought I saw—the shadow itself curl up around her knobby, chapped ankles.

"Dismey!" I cried. "Dismey!"

"Teacher!" she sobbed. "Oh, teacher!"

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I had my arms around her, trying to warm her stiff little hands in mine, trembling to her shivering, wincing to the shriveled blue lips that shook with her crying.

"But, Dismey, honey!" I cried. "It isn't so! You could have come back to the room anytime! A rock can't hold your shadow! It isn't true!"

But I had to move that rock before I could pick her up to carry her back to the room.

It was a subdued, worried room the rest of the day. Bannie and Michael lost all interest in working. They sat apprehensively in their chairs, waiting for lightning to strike. I didn't say anything to them. I had nothing left to say. I had said and re-said everything I could ever think of. I had done what I knew to do, and it hadn't worked. Not even a trip into the office to interview Mr. Beasley had subdued them more than half a day. I couldn't even think straight about the matter any more. I had reached the point where I believed that I had felt the tug of a tethered shadow. I had found it necessary to move a rock before I could lift a child. I was out of my depth—but completely. And I was chilled to realize that not only Dismey but I—an adult—was entrapped in this believing bit. What might happen next? A feeling that must have been psychic indigestion kept me swallowing all afternoon.

In the warmth of the room, Dismey soon stopped shivering and went quietly about her work, but her eyes slid past the boys or looked through them. Donna swished her brief skirts up to the supply table for paper for Dismey, because the boys sat between her and the table. It looked as though the iron had finally entered Dismey's soul, and I hoped hopelessly that she had finally got wise to the little monsters.

The unnaturally subdued restraint lasted until dismissal time. I had the quietest, most industrious room in my experience—but it wasn't a happy one.

At put-away time, Michael and Bannie put their chairs up on the table *quietly*—without being told to. They *walked* to the coat closet. They lingered by the door until they saw that I had no word for them—or smile—or even frown. They scuffled slowly off to the bus gate. Dismey scurried out of the room as if she were the guilty party and had no word or smile for *me,* and I scuffled off slowly to bus duty.

Children bounce back amazingly. The next day—oh, lordy! that's today!—started off normally enough. We worked well *all this morning*—though at the tops of our voices. Michael and Bannie had the devilish light flickering in their eyes again. Dismey neither noticed them nor ig-

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nored them. She had a small smile that turned up the corners of her mouth a little. She played happily with Donna and I blessed the good night's sleep I'd had for my return to calmness. I hoped—oh, how I hoped this morning—that the boys had finally decided to find something besides Dismey to occupy their energies.

Lunchtime passed and the mild temperatures out-of-doors let us relax into a full-time play period. Afternoon recess came and went. The tide of children flowed across the floor to pool around my feet for story time.

"Bannie," I said automatically, "I don't want you sitting by—" Then I felt a huge sinking inside of me. My eyes flew to Dismey. She returned my look, completely at ease and relaxed, the small smile still bending her mouth.

"Where's Bannie and Michael?" I asked casually, feeling insanely that this was yesterday.

"They tol' me they wuz go to beeg playgroun'," sniffed Hannery. "They alla time sneak up there."

"Yeh, yeh," said Treesa. "They go'd to beeg playgroun' but they comed back. They go'd to Old Building and slided on steps. Ain' s'posed to slide on steps," she added virtuously.

"Maybe they didn't hear the bell," suggested Donna. "When you play by the Old Building, sometimes you don't."

I looked at Dismey. She looked back. Her small, pointed tongue circled the smile and then disappeared for the automatic swallow. I looked away, uncomfortable.

"Well, they'll miss out on the story, then," I said. "And because they've been late twice this week, they'll have to be in Isolation for twice as long as they are late." I checked my watch to time the boys and began to read. I didn't hear a word I read. I suppose I paraphrased the story as I usually do, bringing it down to first grade level. I suppose I skipped over discursive passages that had little interest for my children, but I have no way of knowing. I was busy trying to hold down that psychic indigestion again, the feeling that something terribly wrong had to be put to rights.

After the group went back to their seats and became immersed in their work, I called Dismey quietly up to my desk.

"Where are Michael and Bannie?" I asked her.

She flushed and twisted her thin shoulders. "Out on the playground," she said.

"Why didn't they come when the bell rang?" I asked.

"They couldn't hear the bell ring." The little smile lifted the corners of her mouth. I shivered.

"Why not?" Dismey looked at me without expression. She looked down at the desk and followed

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her finger as it rubbed back and forth on the edge. "Dismey," I urged. "Why couldn't they hear the bell?"

"'Cause I changed them," she said, her chin lifting a little. "I changed them into rocks."

"Changed them?" I asked blankly. "Into rocks?"

"Yes," said Dismey. "They're mean. They're awfully mean. I changed them." The little smile curled briefly again.

"How did you do it?" I asked. "What did you do?"

"I learned the magic word," she said proudly. "I can say it right. You know, the one you read to us. That PYRZQXGL." Her voice fluttered and hissed through a sound that raised the short hairs on the back of my neck and all down both my arms.

"And it worked!" I cried incredulously.

"Why, sure," she said. "You said it would. It's a magic word. You read it in the book. Mama told me how to say it. She said how come they put words like that in kids' books. They get away with anything nowadays. That's not a word for kids. But she told me how to say it anyway. See?" She picked up the stapler from my desk. "Be a baby rabbit—PYRZQXGL!" She sputtered the word at it.

And there was a tiny gray bunny nosing inquisitively at my blotter!

"Be what you was before," said Dismey. "PYRZQXGL!" The bunny started slightly and the stapler fell over on its side. I picked it up. It felt warm. I dropped it.

"But—but—" I took a deep breath. "Where are the boys, Dismey? Do you know?"

"I guess so," she said, frowning a little. "I guess I remember."

"Go get them," I said. "Bring them to me."

She looked at me quietly for a moment, her jaw muscles tensing, then she said, "Okay, teacher."

So I sent her, heaven help me! And she came back, heaven help us all! She came back and put three little rocks on the corner of my desk.

"I guess these is them," she said. "Two of them are, anyway. I couldn't remember exactly which ones they was, so I brought an extra one."

We looked at the rocks.

"They're scared," she said. "I turned them into *scared* rocks."

"Do rocks know?" I asked. "Can rocks be scared?"

Dismey considered, head tilted. "I don't know." The small smile came back. "But if they can—they are."

And there they lie, on my green blotter, in the middle of my battered desk, in front of my crowded room—three rocks, roughly the size of marbles—and two of them are Michael and Bannie.

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And time is running out fast—fast! I can't say the magic word. Nobody can say the magic word except Dismey—and her mother.

Of course I could take them to Mr. Beasley in the office and say, "Here are two of my boys. Remember? They're the ones that kept picking on the little girl in my room. She turned them into rocks because they were mean. What shall we do?"

Or I could take them to the boys' parents and say, "One of these is your boy. Which one resembles Bannie the most? Take your choice."

I've been looking down at my quiet hands for fifteen minutes now, but the rising murmur in the room and the rustle of movement tell me that it's past time to change activities. I've got to do something—and soon.

Looking back over the whole affair, I see only one possible course of action. I'm going to take a page from Dismey's own book. I'm going to be the believingest teacher there ever was. I believe—I believe implicitly that Dismey will mind me—she'll do as she is told. I believe, I believe, I believe—

"Dismey, come here, please." Here comes the obedient child, up to my desk. "It's almost time to go home, Dismey," I tell her. "Here, take the rocks and go outside by the door. Turn them back into Michael and Bannie again."

"I don't want to." It's not refusal! It's not refusal! It's just a statement.

"I know you don't. But the bell will be ringing soon, and we don't want to make them miss the bus. Mr. Beasley gets very annoyed when we miss the bus."

"But they were awfully mean." Her eyes are hurt and angry.

"Yes, I know they were, and I'm going to use the paddle on them. But they've been rocks a long time—scared rocks. They know now that you can be mean back at them, so they'll probably let you alone and not bother you any more. Go on, take them outside." She's looking at me intently.

"Remember, your mama said mind the teacher." Her jaws tighten.

The three rocks click together in her hand. She is going out the door. It swings shut jerkily behind her.

Now I am waiting for the doorknob to turn again. *I believe, I believe, I believe—*

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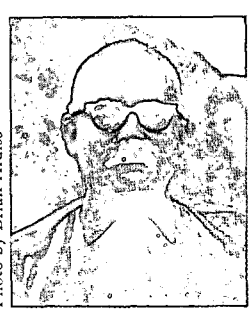

Photo by Brian Aldiss

Harry Harrison is a New Yorker by upbringing, lived ten years abroad in Mexico, Spain, Italy, Denmark and England, and is now living in California. His recent novels include *Make Room, Make Room, The Stainless Steel Rat* and *The Daleth Effect*. He is also an editor and anthologist, most recently of *The Year 2000* and *Nova 1*. His latest short story, "Wife to the Lord," begins on page 39.

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